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Tracy Sung

May 2019

PALACE MAID MURALS: ESTABLISHING A FEMININE SPACE IN THE TANG
IMPERIAL TOMB OF PRINCESS YONGTAI

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Art

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art History

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Tracy Sung

APPROVED:

Judith Steinhoff, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Sandra Zalman, Ph.D.

Bradley Bailey, Ph.D.

Andrew Davis, Ph.D.
Dean, Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

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Abstract

This thesis examines Princess Yongtai's satellite tomb in Qianling Mausoleum, which was constructed in 706 CE during the Chinese Tang dynasty. It boasts one of the most intact and exemplary murals of palace maids within its inner chambers. As the tomb was inextricably linked to the contemporaneous society and politics of the period, and if read as paneled screens, these palace maid murals reveal the contemporaneous feminine space that governed women's behaviors in early imperial China—examples which can also be seen in the paintings created during the Tang dynasty. The naturalistic and illusionary realism used by the Tang artist to construct these murals suggest an agency afforded to women that yields new understanding of the women's place in Tang society. This new perspective will hopefully open a door into which a gendered reading may be a more frequent approach in the field of Chinese art history.

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Introduction

The tomb of Princess Yongtai (706AD), in Qianling Mausoleum, is one of the multiple Chinese imperial tombs that have long attracted the interest of art historians, not only due to its iconography, ambiguous pictorial programs and political implications, but also for its spiritual significance and the intricate dynamics between the images in the tombs and the spirits of the deceased. In studying Yongtai's tomb I propose a reading of the murals of the palace maids as painted screens in which the figures represent a transition from a painted illusion on the wall into living entities within the spiritual realm. This conception of the palace maids as figures on a screen coincides with legendary Chinese tales and traditions that tell of women painted so naturalistically that their spirits are thought to transcend their physical medium and become real corporeal beings. I further argue that the processional format and naturalistic style in which the maids are painted demonstrates their active roles as masters of their own feminine space, a space delineated and established by the screen.

Since its discovery in 1960, Yongtai's tomb and its murals have been studied extensively by art historians. Some earlier scholars, like Jonathan Hay, have seen these murals as menus of the different choices that the elite had within the tomb. Hay posits that the spirits traveling to and from the tomb were individuals accustomed to having various options to choose from, like their choice of armed guards, groups of palace maids or daily utensils. His argument offers an explanation of the mystery of the repetitive pictorial program of Yongtai's processional palace maids—a pattern that has long lacked

a concrete explanation.¹ The majority of studies, however, focus exclusively on the style of the murals. Wang Renbo and He Xiuling, analyzed the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the murals and compared their style to other works by known artists of the Tang dynasty. In contrast, art historian Wang Boren examined the material physicality of the murals. Other scholars, like Cai Ruying, have compared the palace maid murals to paintings of other virtuous women of the Wei Jin dynasty, tracing the artistic origin of the murals to Indian Buddhist painting, and concentrating on the stylistic similarities of the three different stages of Tang mural construction.² The renowned art historian Mary H. Fong, who published widely on Tang tomb mural paintings, advanced the idea that the chiaroscuro present in the murals was actually of Chinese origin rather than European influence, confining her interests to the stylistic renderings of the women themselves.³

While scholars have not previously interpreted the palace maids as participants in the gender politics of the period, I will demonstrate that understanding the screen as a gendered object distinguishing male and female spaces supports such a reading. In China, the screen served a dual purpose in both the homes of the elite and the imperial palace. Not only works of art to be admired, screens also established a space and a place. This space was literally defined by the physicality of the screen, which can block the viewer's gaze. This was commonly used to prohibit outsiders, usually males, from ogling the females of the household, while still allowing the presence of the woman to be made known. However, the woman could not be separated from the space delineated by the

¹ Jonathan Hay, "Seeing through Dead Eyes: How Early Tang Tombs Staged the Afterlife," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 57/58 (2010): 19.

² Ruying Cai, "A Study on the Style and Maid's Image of Princess Yongtai's Wall Painting" (Master's thesis, National Taiwan University of the Arts, 2010), 5, <https://etds.ncl.edu.tw/cgi-bin/gs32/gswweb.cgi/ccd=8S.Adj/webmge?switchlang=en>.

³ Mary H. Fong, "The Technique of Chiaroscuro in Chinese Painting from Han through Tang," *Artibus Asiae* 38, no. 2/3 (1976): 91.

screen; her expected place was outlined by the presence of a screen and she was considered the master of this feminine space.⁴ The screen becomes an object of admiration, serving as an agent of the objectification of the woman, and a firm reminder of a woman's rightful place in society. An example of this practice of using the screen to delineate a feminine space was recorded during the Tang dynasty and involved the sacrificial ritual used by the imperial family. According to the Tang dynasty annals, while offering sacrifices to the gods, Empress Wu was permitted to partake in the rituals by her husband Emperor Gaozong's side only if she was hidden behind a screen, so that only her palace maids and the Emperor see her.⁵ In this sense, the screen established a political place of domesticity. Despite her power as an equal ruler with the Emperor Gaozong in 666 AD, Empress Wu was expected to stay within the space physically delineated by the screen. She was not to interact freely with the outside world or even the spiritual realm. Her past ritualized role and place set forth by Chinese tradition, as a woman, were thus physically manifested by a screen. In my study of Princess Yontai's tomb, I will explore this concept of the feminine space established by the palace maid murals read as screens.

In Chapter 1, I will outline the construction of the tomb and the significance of its structural layout. I will also draw comparisons of the artistic naturalism and the presence of the perceived gaze depicted in Princess Yongtai's palace maid murals, with other Tang dynasty paintings such as the scrolls titled *Court Ladies Playing Double Sixes* and *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*. These comparisons will demonstrate the Chinese painter's skill in conveying the illusion of figures coming alive within the spiritual realm

⁴ Hung Wu, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 11.

⁵ Mike Dash, "The Demonization of Empress Wu," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 10, 2012, accessed October 29, 2018, www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-demonization-of-empress-wu-20743091/.

and asserting their agency within the feminine space. In Chapter 2, I will argue that the murals in Princess Yongtai's tomb were themselves intended to be seen as screens. Using visual and conceptual comparisons of screen murals found in other Chinese tombs and paintings, I will explore the screen as a physical division of a female space and demonstrate that a mural, when read as a screen, serves as the key link between the representations of the mortal realm and the spirits of the afterlife.

It should be noted that due to the lack of preserved primary and secondary sources, visual materials and folklores from outside the immediate era of the tomb's construction will be heavily consulted. While recognizing the lack of primary resources and the limitations of studying only these murals without their 706 counterparts, I intend to focus upon the singular female of the great burials, whose tomb is the largest one ever to house a woman. The palace maid murals reflect the Tang female life during a time of momentous changes to the traditional notions of political power, which had been previously identified only with maleness. Yongtai's palace maid murals and the naturalistic style in which they are painted, the ethereal nature of the procession and the untraditional outward gaze of a singular palace maid may help us better understand the agency of women as conceived by contemporary Tang society.

Chapter 1

Historical and Political Context

The Tang dynasty was instated in 618 CE when one of the rebelling Southern Dynasty generals of Han Chinese and Steppe heritage, Li Yuan, announced the founding of a new dynasty amidst a time of tumultuous chaos in China.⁶ Preceding the Tang, the Sui dynasty (581-618 CE) was also ruled by people of mixed Han and minor ethnic heritages and had been successful in uniting the previously fragmented Northern and Southern Dynasties. However, the Sui rulers were incapable of maintaining their power.⁷ In 624 CE, after years of violent warfare, Li Yuan and his family eventually subdued the Sui, defeating neighboring rivals and securing control of the empire. The Li family's reign officially marks the beginning of the Tang, a dynasty that would rule China for nearly three centuries.⁸ Often called the "The Glorious Tang", the period saw a flourishing of the arts and literature, as well as many successful military conquests; it was

⁶ James Minahan, *Ethnic Groups of South Asia and the Pacific: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 92. In the imperial era, people referred to as Han Chinese, or ethnically Han, were those descended from the Neolithic Huaxia agricultural tribes of the Yellow River in northern China. The Han dynasty founders traced their lineage to the Huaxia people and regarded those of the civilized Huaxia lineage as superior to those of the outlying barbaric tribes. Due to the expansive empire of the Han dynasty, as well as its success at the time as a major regional power in East Asia, those descended from the Huaxia began to refer to themselves as the Han people, as a sign of pride and prestige for the Han Dynasty. The Chinese script and language are also referred to as Han characters and Han Chinese.

⁷ Edward H. Schafer, "The Glory of T'ang," in *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand A Study of T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1963), 7. Due to the vastness of the Chinese kingdom, unifying all of China has historically proven to be a difficult task, as it meant maintaining control over large amounts of territory away from the center of the kingdom, while also ensuring those in charge of various territories did not abuse their military power and attempt revolt. The Chinese kingdom also had to maintain defenses against their ambitious neighbors in Mongolia, the Koguryo kingdoms, Manchuria, Korea, the Western Turks and the Suzerains of Serindia, all of whom bordered China and sought to advance their own political agendas through the conquering of China.

⁸ Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600* (New York, NY: Norton, 2000), 196.

also regarded as the height of Buddhist power and influence. The Tang's level of imperial patronage reached a height never again attained in the subsequent Chinese dynasties.⁹

Embraced by the Sui rulers, Buddhism's prominence continued into the Tang. However, the Tang family did not fully embrace traditional Confucian tradition, believing it would eclipse Steppe ethnic identity with Han Chinese tradition; instead, a sinicized Buddhism, which bore Confucian traits and had a large Han Chinese following, was pragmatically chosen as the unofficial state religion.¹⁰ Buddhism's tenets also supported foreign rule in China. A universalizing religion, Buddhism welcomed people of all races and cultures, thereby nurturing a diverse social body and encouraging followers to embrace the heterogeneous ethnicities and culture of the Tang Dynasty.¹¹

Wu Zetian (r. 690-705 CE) was the only female ruler in Chinese imperial history and used Buddhism to justify her rule.¹² Like her male predecessors, Wu Zetian was an

⁹ Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 70.

¹⁰ Hansen, *The Open Empire*, 59. The Indian Buddhist monks faced resistance from the Chinese people and their traditional values, as the Buddhist religion focused largely on the individual while the Chinese valued on Confucian thought centered on filial piety and kinship interdependence. Thus, Buddhism began a Sinicization process that allowed filial descendants to pray to the Buddha for enlightenment for their ancestors. This is seen at Longmen, a major Buddhist commission, where a common inscriptions on the commissioned pieces read, "We respectfully make and present this holy image in honor of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and pray that all living creatures may attain salvation, and particularly that the souls of our ancestors and relatives [names given] may find repose and release."

¹¹ Hansen, *The Open Empire*, 57.

¹² Ann Paludan, *Chronicle of the Chinese Emperors: The Reign by Reign Record of the Rulers of Imperial China* (London, England: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 100. Emperor Wu of Zhou had many names. During her youth, she was given the name Wu Mei, meaning the "glamorous Wu". This name is only used when referring to her youth. During her time as Empress and Empress Dowager, she is referred to as Wu Hou, meaning Empress Wu. During her shadow rule with her husband, Li Zhi or Emperor Gaozong, she was known as Wu Zhao, with the character "Zhao 曌, being one that she created to demonstrate the equality of her power with her husband's. This character's top portion reads "sun and moon", referring to her and Gaozong. The bottom portion of the character reads "sky", referring to her and Gaozong's heavenly mandated rule and status of superiority above the common people. During her rule as emperor, she used the name Wu Zetian or Sacred and Divine Emperor / 聖神皇帝. After her death, she was also given multiple names, as her rule was reevaluated by the succeeding emperors who either agreed or disagreed with her rule. The final burial name given to her was 則天順聖皇后, meaning The Heavenly Favorable and Holy Empress. For the purposes of this section, which focuses on her reign as emperor, the name Wu Zetian will be used.

avid patron of the Buddhist monasteries and cave sites; she especially favored the Maitreya cult as it was linked to a female ruler. She also was very fond of the Buddhist text, *The Great Cloud Sutra* (c. 690 CE). This sutra tells of a female goddess who insisted on retaining her female form and residing in the mortal realm to assist other beings in reaching nirvana. According to the sutra, due to the goddess' virtue and devotion to Buddhist teachings, her country would prosper, and rulers of neighboring countries would submit to her. Wu Zetian strongly identified herself with this goddess and used the sutra to justify her ascension to the throne. She ordered monasteries to be built in all the prefectures in China and issued a decree that monks were to lecture on *The Great Cloud Sutra*, resulting in the widespread distribution of an otherwise minor Buddhist text.¹³

The Zhou Dynasty created by Wu Zetian did not last beyond 705 CE when she was overthrown in a coup, led by her son Li Zhe, who took the name of Emperor Zhongzong and restored the Tang dynasty. His rule, however, was also very short-lived: he was murdered in 710 CE by old supporters of his mother's rule.¹⁴ Although his reign was brief, Zhongzong's decree to construct three major imperial tombs was his lasting legacy. These three extravagant burial sites belonged to his brother Li Xian, and Zhongzong's own two children, Li Chongrun and Li Xianhui, known posthumously as Prince Zhanghuai, Crown Prince Yide and Princess Yongtai, respectively. These honorable titles restored their elite positions within the Li family after their purported murders on the orders of Wu Zetian, who had denied them a proper burial. Zhongzong ordered that they be afforded the highest funeral honors and had them interred in the satellite tombs of the Qianling Mausoleum, the imperial burial complex of the Li

¹³ Hansen, *The Open Empire*, 202.

¹⁴ Hansen, *The Open Empire*, 202.

family.¹⁵ This mausoleum, and specifically the tomb of Princess Yongtai, is the focus of my study.

Qianling Mausoleum

The Qianling Mausoleum is located in Shaanxi Province, approximately six kilometers north of Mount Liang and eighty kilometers away from the ancient capital of Chang'an, or modern-day Xi'an. The location of Mount Liang as the site of the imperial mausoleum was carefully selected by Wu Zetian, as the base of the mountain forms a valley where the tombs could be protected by the surrounding peaks.¹⁶ The construction of the mausoleum was completed in 684 CE and houses select members of the Li imperial family.¹⁷ Aside from the main earthen tumulus within the mountain where Wu Zetian and her husband Emperor Gaozong are buried, there are seventeen satellite tomb scattered underground—including the tombs of Princess Yongtai, Prince Zhanghuai and Crown Prince Yide.¹⁸ A privilege reserved for only a very few, to be buried in the

¹⁵ Bai Gen Xing and Fan Ying Feng, *Yong Tai Gong Zhu Yu Yong Tai Gong Zhu Mu* (Xi'an, Shaanxi: San Qin Chu Ban She, 2004), 68. The nature of their deaths is not explicitly known. It is said that Prince Zhanghuai was forced to commit suicide by one of Wu Zetian's officials as a preemptive measure to prevent him from usurping the throne from her. Crown Prince Yide and Princess Yongtai were both supposedly discussing the corruption at Wu Zetian's court, namely blaming her two male consorts, the Zhang brothers. Reports of their criticism reached Wu Zetian and she ordered them to commit suicide in 701 CE for daring to voice their disapproval of her rule. However, as there is no documentary evidence recording these causes of death and because these accounts differ from the official recorded history on the tombs' epitaphs, they have remained subjects of great contention in the Chinese historical field.

¹⁶ Xiaoli Wang and Yanxi Zhang, *Qian Ling Bo Wu Guan* (Beijing, Beijing: Wen Wu Chu Ban She, 2006), 10. Mount Liang is also known for its feminine looking terrain. The northern and southern peaks of Mount Liang form the breasts of a sleeping woman, giving it the nickname of "Sleeping Beauty". With the tombs buried within the peaks, historians argue that it appears that the dead are nestled under the embrace of a powerful woman, recalling the rule and legacy of Wu Zetian.

¹⁷ Tonia Eckfeld, *Imperial Tombs in Tang China* (London, England: Routledge, 2011), 26.

¹⁸ Xinian Fu and Nancy Steinhardt, "The Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties," in *Traditional Chinese Architecture : Twelve Essays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 106. According to Sui and Tang burial rituals, only members of the imperial family were allowed to be buried within natural mountains and with the mountain serving as their tumulus. Officials or nobles could only be buried with a man-made tumulus.

satellite tombs was considered a great honor, as this allowed the spirits of the deceased to interact with and serve the emperor who was buried within the main tumulus.¹⁹ The spirits within the main tumulus and the satellite tombs were believed to travel from tomb to tomb using spirit paths, paved trails that led to the tombs' entrances.²⁰

These paths and the mausoleum itself were constructed to mimic the infrastructure and city layout of Chang'an, with the main tumulus area serving as the inner capital and the satellite tombs representing the minor outlying palaces that surround the capital building.²¹ As seen in Figure 1.1, the main halls where the emperor and his harem resides is Taiji Palace, or Taiji Gong. The Eastern Palace, or Dong Gong, and the residences surrounding the square outline of the main Taiji Palace complex, are the residential courts of the imperial families. This layout is reflected in the plan of the Qianling Mausoleum as seen in Figure 1.2. Like the Taiji Palace, the Qianling Mausoleum is in its own square complex, surrounded by the satellite tombs of Yongtai, Yide and Zhanghuai. The paths in Figure 1.1, which connect the different entrances of each palace are mimicked by the spirit paths found at the Qianling Mausoleum, which link the three major tomb constructions with the main tumulus.

¹⁹ Wang and Zhang, *Qian Ling Bo Wu Guan*, 18 and Minggui Wang, *Cai Tu Ban Zhong Guo Huang Shi Mi Wen* (Tai Bei, Zhong He: Han Yu Guo Ji Wen Hua Chu Ban, 2006), 124. Although Wu Zetian was an emperor of her own dynasty, she gave up her title in death and was buried with the rites afforded to an empress. Therefore, in death, the spirits would serve the one emperor in the complex—Emperor Gaozong.

²⁰ Eckfeld, *Imperial Tombs*, 22. The spirit path of the main tumulus was flanked with stone statues that depicted foreign military envoys, which displayed the expansive reach of the Chinese empire during the Tang dynasty. The spirit paths of tombs like Princess Yongtai's, Crown Prince Yide's and Prince Zhanghuai's were flanked with smaller and fewer stone statues.

²¹ Saehyang P. Chung, "The Sui-Tang Eastern Palace in Changan: Toward a Reconstruction of Its Plan," *Artibus Asiae* 58, no. 1/2 (1998): 24. This view is according to the tombs that have been excavated. Presently, only five of the satellite tombs have been excavated and there are no further planned excavations in the near future. See also, "No Excavation of Qianling Mausoleum, Official Says," China News, published January 17, 2012, accessed October 29, 2018, <http://www.ecns.cn/2012/01-17/6410.shtml>.

Not only does the general mausoleum layout echo that of Chang'an, the satellite tombs for the imperial family also reflect the occupant's earthly palaces, a result of the ancient Chinese belief that the underworld was a parallel universe to the mortal realm. The three tombs of 706 CE were all constructed in a similar fashion, with a tumulus in the shape of a truncated pyramid directly above underground chambers. The entrances are above ground and descend by way of a diagonal ramp to meet the tomb chambers, while the sloping ramp is met with vertical shafts, as seen in Crown Prince Yide's tomb in Figure 1.3.²² The similarities of the Eastern Palace with Crown Prince Yide's tomb structure are physical representations of the ancient Chinese belief that tombs should mirror the deceased's mortal residence, as seen in Figure 1.4. The halls within the Eastern Palace are reflected almost exactly in miniature within the passageways of Yide's chamber. As Yongtai and Yide were buried within a month of each other in the same area, and both tombs are designated as *ling*, they share similar layouts, as seen in Figure 1.5.²³ Historians are not certain of the actual layout of Yongtai's residential palace. However, as her brother's tomb mimicked that of his Eastern Palace and Qianling

²² Chung, "The Sui-Tang Eastern Palace," 106. According to Tang Dynasty ritual, children of the emperor were not permitted to have a natural tumulus demarcating their tomb. Rather, they were allowed tombs with truncated pyramid tops to signify their royal status, but not elevate them to the same honor given to the emperors.

²³ According to the Tang dynasty records, Princess Yongtai was given the honor of having her tomb designated as a *ling* 陵. This was an honor reserved only for an emperor or empress. See also Mary H. Fong, "Four Chinese Royal Tombs of the Early Eighth Century," *Artibus Asiae* 35, no. 4 (1973): 308. Later research has suggested that Emperor Zhongzong gave Yongtai such an honor to attempt to conceal the embarrassment of his mother's usurpation to the throne through the reinstatement of the imperial status of a Li family member. See Jenny Chao-Hui Liu, "Ritual Concepts and Political Factors in the Making of Tang Dynasty Princess Tombs in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries" (PhD diss., University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, 2005), 123-124, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/docview/1976986134?accountid=7107>.

Mausoleum reflects Chang'an, and burial rituals dictate that tombs reflect the corporeal residences of the deceased, Yongtai's tomb is also assumed to mirror her earthly palace.²⁴

Tomb Ritual in Chinese History

Four developments of the Zhou and Han periods, along with the Bronze Age tradition of intertwining politics and tomb art, reveal the multilayered history of burial ritual throughout Chinese history that would ultimately reach its apex in the Tang. The tradition of constructing the tomb as a residence for the deceased's soul was not always the practice in ancient Chinese burial customs. Before the Tang dynasty, the traditional method was the casket grave—an insulated and sealed form of burial. The understanding and interpretation of the deceased was thus confined to the objects within the casket and the pit that housed it. Used extensively in China's Bronze Age, during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the casket grave was later abandoned. Despite this, the tradition of intertwining politics with the spiritual realm that began during this period continued in the burial practices of future dynasties.²⁵

Unlike the casket-grave, the multi-chambered architectural tomb, adopted in the early Han period, was separated into several rooms, with the innermost housing the casket—a practice that continued into the Tang dynasty.²⁶ According to Wu Hung's scholarship on ancient tombs, this development of the object-based design of the casket into a space-oriented chamber can be attributed to four key changes made in ritual

²⁴ Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (State University of New York Press, NY: 1998), 165.

²⁵ Lothar Von. Falkenhausen, *Suspended Music: Chime Bells in the Culture of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 25.

²⁶ Hung Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2015), 30.

practice and societal belief during the Eastern Zhou to Han dynasty era. These changes—the locations of ancestral worship, the understanding of the soul, the concept of the afterlife and the establishment of an under-world bureaucracy—persisted into Tang dynasty tomb construction.²⁷

In pre-Han times, ancestral worship was performed in two locations: at an ancestral temple and at a corresponding tomb, with overwhelming importance placed upon the former. The ancestral temples of the Xia, Shang and Western Zhou periods were permitted to be constructed within the city walls, and as such were favored because of the accessibility to multiple ancestors. Due to their locations, the temples were under constant renewal, with updated ritual objects and newly inducted ancestors. In contrast, the tombs were inaccessible, located far beyond the city walls. Considered a static symbol of the deceased, the tombs were sealed after burial and no new additions were permitted.²⁸

This preference for ancestral temples, however, changed in the Eastern Han period (25-220 CE) under Emperor Guangwu, who abolished the ancestral temple system to legitimize his rule. Emperor Guangwu had taken the throne primarily through his military prowess, bolstered by his claim to be a distant relative of the Liu family, the former Han rulers. However, he recognized his association with royal blood was weak and his succession could therefore be heavily contested. During this time, it was still popular to pay respects at the ancestors' temple—for Guangwu this meant the Liu family temple. However, he did not want to be reminded of the weak lineage that allowed him

²⁷ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 31.

²⁸ Hung Wu, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 111.

the throne and recognized his heir's claims to emperor would be precarious in a succession, so he sought to shift focus of ancestral worship to tombs. In this way, people would not be reminded of the lineage of the deceased and question the royal succession and would instead worship the individual being. According to the *History of the Latter Han*, the Emperor Guangwu attended ancestral sacrifices fifty-seven times, an unprecedented number indeed, as previous emperors never attended these events. Of these fifty-seven rituals, fifty-one were held at tombs; only the remaining six were held at ancestral temples, a deliberate shift in emphasis from temples to tombs. After Emperor Guangwu's death, his son, Emperor Ming, transferred the temple ceremonies to the mausoleum where his father was buried and from then on, all forms of ancestral worship and ritual were to be held at mausoleums, while the ancestral temples existed only nominally, no longer readily frequented by the imperial family.²⁹ This change of location in honoring the dead required an enlarged space to conduct rites that would enable descendants and mourners to visit the departed soul before the sealing of the tomb.

The Chinese elite's understanding of the soul also factored into this shift from an object-based casket to an architectural space of a chamber. According to Chinese tradition, the soul is split into two parts—the *hun* and the *po*. One part was the superior soul spirit called the *hun*, and the other was the inferior body-soul called the *po*. Only the *hun* had the ability to travel to the afterworld of the immortals, while the *po* stayed within the tomb and used the material possessions buried with the body.³⁰ The *hun* was also the part of the soul that was summoned if their descendants called upon and offered sacrifices to them. The *po* was associated with the *yin* and with the earth, water and darkness, and

²⁹ Wu, *Monumentality*, 119-120.

³⁰ Hansen, *The Open Empire*, 119.

governed the physicality and animality of humankind.³¹ Fixed to the body, it also represented human emotion. The *po* was the part of the soul that stayed to rot with the bones in the grave while the *hun*, associated with the *yang*, was able to escape the body and begin its path to immortality. Within the soul, the *hun* was thought to be superior to the *po* because its cultural sophistication and intellect were held in a higher societal regard than that of uncontrollable emotion. Therefore, the *hun* controlled the *po*. The *po* of the soul was believed to continue to live amongst men, flitting between the mortal and immortal realms.³² According to Confucian thought, the division of the soul between a heavenly destination and earthly residence regulated the sacrificial ritual afforded to the *hun* and the *po*. Temple sacrifices were thus for the *hun*, while grave sacrifices were designated for the *po*, necessitating both an ancestral temple and a tomb. However, when the early Han emperors made the ancestral temple obsolete, this dualistic categorization of the soul continued only in historical theory while a new practical understanding of the soul emerged. Inscriptions on Han tombs reveal the concept of the *hun* and *po* as a unified entity residing within the chamber tomb, beginning the tradition of incorporating both heavenly elements within the tomb for the comfort of the *hun* and also earthly objects, like that of the architecture of contemporaneous homes, in consideration of the *po*.³³

In addition, a new understanding of immortality during the Han dictated the motifs and pictorial programs of tomb walls—a vibrant tradition that continued into the Tang. Before the Han dynasty, immortality was understood as a being escaping death and

³¹ Charles D. Benn, *Chinas Golden Age Everyday Life in the Tang Dynasty* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), 277.

³² Benn, *Chinas Golden Age*, 278.

³³ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 32.

residing in the mortal realm for eternity. However, beginning in the Han dynasty, a new notion of immortality emerged, in which immortality in a heavenly paradise was preferable to an eternity in the earthly realm.³⁴ This new understanding of immortality led to the widespread belief that it was achieved after death and burial within a tomb and that the decorations of the tomb walls assisted in its attainment. Images of heavenly lands and divine beings thus became common motifs within tomb murals. Perhaps the most popular images symbolizing immortality during this period were of bird-like beings—a motif repeated on Han dynasty bronzes and tomb murals and a symbol also found in Tang tombs.³⁵ It was believed that immortality was associated with winged creatures due to the ancient Chinese mythical work, *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which describes immortal beings as “feathered people” who resemble birds. Due to the cultural and societal recognition of birds as both auspicious and immortal creatures, images of them heavily adorned Han dynasty tombs.³⁶ The embrace of this new version of immortality by both the elite population and general citizenry can be attributed to its guaranteed possibility of eternal existence, in contrast to the ancient notion that death signified an end to the pursuit of immortal life. By placing auspicious motifs, like feathered people on funerary décor, tomb inhabitants were thought to have been accompanied by these fantastic creatures into the immortal realm, thus signifying an attainment of immortality that eluded them in the mortal realm—this explicitly signifies this new belief in immortality, distinguishing it from early modes of thought.³⁷ The acceptance of this form

³⁴ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 32.

³⁵ Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 160. Additionally, Wu Yan, a poet of the Warring States (c. 475-221 BC) period, described immortal beings as figures with wings, in his works concerning the land of immortality.

³⁶ Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 161.

³⁷ Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 161.

of immortality allowed those who could not achieve it in the mortal realm an opportunity to attain eternal happiness without any additional effort. The ancient Chinese believed that by decorating the walls with these heavenly and auspicious motifs, the tomb, originally a place of death and sorrow, became an immortal paradise primed for the transmission of the deceased into the heavenly realm. The embracing of the tomb mural tradition to frame the setting of the afterlife is further evidence of the widely held belief that these paintings themselves had the ability to transcend the earthly world in which they were created, and perform a living, active role within the afterlife.

Another change of understanding in the immortal realm was the concept of a governing hierarchy in the underworld. Before the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-221 BC), there was no organization of deities in the afterlife. While there were supernatural beings governing the mortal realm, known as celestial deities, terrestrial deities, and ancestral spirits, there is no record that the ancient Chinese recognized deities that ruled the afterlife until the Eastern Zhou period. In an Eastern Zhou tomb named Baoshan 2, sacrificial texts detailing a novel pantheon describe a new understanding of an underground establishment. These divinatory texts reveal an expanded category of the previously recognized terrestrial deities. New additions included subterranean deities, like the God of Posthumous Journey, the God of Life-Mandate and various others that governed the spirits of those who died an unnatural death. This Eastern Zhou tradition continued into the Han dynasty as well. Inscriptions have revealed twenty different types of subterranean deities who specifically govern tombs and the underworld, demonstrating

the ancient Chinese people's belief in an afterlife that mirrored the bureaucratic conventions of the mortal realm.³⁸

The changing beliefs and rituals from the Zhou and Han period to the Tang dynasty heavily impacted tomb tradition and expose the undeniable synthesis of the mortal and immortal realms. These ideas of the immortal world, understood through ancestral worship, the development of a new kind of soul, an evolving idea of immortality, and the establishment of an underworld bureaucracy, governed the carefully articulated tomb rituals of the Zhou and Han dynasties. Drawing from tomb rituals of the imperial past, the Tang dynasty built upon the new notions of the immortal realm and incorporated the novel beliefs of immortality into motifs found in tomb murals and *mingqi*, believing that they aided the deceased's journey to the afterlife. Understanding the origins of the tomb ritual therefore permits a greater comprehension of the style, underlying influences, and gender politics of Tang imperial tombs.

The Construction of Tang Dynasty Tomb Murals

The intertwining of the mortal and immortal realms that enables historians to understand the transformation of images into spiritual entities is emphasized through both the layout of the tomb, and the style of the murals that adorn it. Like the architecture of the chambered tomb, the murals within Yongtai's tomb were considered a reflection of the daily lives of the elite, meticulously designed to reflect the status of the deceased and the desire for a smooth journey to immortality.³⁹ The Han dynasty traditions that dictated the walls of the tomb, made of brick and stone, allowed for the monumental construction

³⁸ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 33.

³⁹ Tianyou Zhou, *Tang Mu Bi Hua Yan Jiu Wen Ji* (Xi'an, Shaanxi: San Qin Chu Ban She, 2003), 4.

of murals during the Tang dynasty, and emphasized the importance of the material of the walls the murals were painted upon.

Through the study of excavated murals, Tang mural scholars have divided mural construction into three main periods, each characterized by a particular style.⁴⁰ The first period ranged from Gaozu's rule to Zhongzong's reign (618-709 CE), an era that was defined by the deceased's ceremonial instruments, hunting scenes, and depictions of daily palace life, as seen in Yongtai's tomb.⁴¹ The second period of tomb paintings began in Ruizong's reign and lasted until the height of the Tang dynasty in Xuanzong's reign, from 710-756 CE. These murals are characterized by depictions of the deceased, with fewer of the processional ceremonies and hunting scenes of earlier works.⁴² The final age spans Zhide's rule to the end of the Tang in 756-907 CE, and is defined by even more depictions of the deceased's daily life and with little to no ceremonial, processional or hunting scenes.⁴³ There is little consensus about the reasons for the changing styles and motifs within the art historical community but the discourse has leaned towards the preferences of the later Tang court for a more domestic life of relaxation, abandoning the nomadic Steppe inclinations of the Tang founders.⁴⁴

Princess Yongtai's Tomb

Princess Yongtai's tomb, unearthed in 1960, builds upon previous traditions of tomb construction established during the Han dynasty and represents the apex of Tang

⁴⁰ Zhou, *Tang Mu Bi Hua*, 6.

⁴¹ Zhou, *Tang Mu Bi Hua*, 14.

⁴² Zhou, *Tang Mu Bi Hua*, 15.

⁴³ Zhou, *Tang Mu Bi Hua*, 15

⁴⁴ Zhou, *Tang Mu Bi Hua*, 15

tomb construction technique through the skillfully rendered and naturalistic style of the tomb murals.⁴⁵ Although there is no documentary evidence nor scholarly consensus on who painted Yongtai's tomb, an examination of the structural layout, stylistic motifs, and pictorial programs within the tomb reinforces another important theme: that the construction of this Tang dynasty tomb and its murals reveal the complex intertwining of the mortal and spiritual worlds. Yongtai's tomb, which follows the chamber tomb tradition, signals a progression from a single defined object, like a casket, to a symbolic space established by architecture and construction. Acknowledging this established space as a framework for interpretation sets the foundation for the explanation of the layout of the tomb and the construction and spatiality of the murals.⁴⁶

Looking at the Tang imperial residences' layout reveals the structure of the domestic rituals that would have also been present in the organization of the Tang imperial tombs like Yongtai's. The layout of elite residences was built on a north-to-south axis and was divided into several courtyards, with each designated for different purposes, such as guest rooms and reception halls.⁴⁷ The outer courtyards near the southern front gate were marked as the men's domain; it was in these reception halls that men would receive visitors and conduct official business. The interior courtyards were designated as women's spaces. Male visitors were not allowed in these private quarters unless they were intimate family members or eunuchs. These spaces were marked not only by their location in the innermost courtyards but also by the screens that would serve

⁴⁵ Sheng-p'ing Yi, Wei Han, and Hung-hsiu Chang, *Highlights of the Tang Dynasty Tomb Frescoes* (Xi'an, Shaanxi: Shaanxi Peoples Fine Arts Pub. House, 1991), 126.

⁴⁶ Zhou, *Tang Mu Bi Hua*, 122.

⁴⁷ Fong, "Four Chinese Royal Tombs," 308.

as physical reminders of a woman's space within the domestic sphere.⁴⁸ The courtyards were connected by porticos that would provide shelter and protection for those walking between them. The same architectural layout of the typical Tang elite home is seen within Yongtai's tomb structure, which is also on a north-south orientation, 87.5 meters in length, with the entrance to the south.⁴⁹ Like the major components of a traditional elite residence, Yongtai's tomb had different 'courtyards' in miniature. The side chambers of her tomb were modeled after the guest rooms, with each chamber housing miniature tomb figurines. The front chamber of the tomb recalls the reception hall, while the first inner chamber, which contains the palace maid murals, reflects the porticos and interior courtyards of a contemporaneous Tang mansion. The final chamber of the tomb, where the coffin is housed and sealed behind a stone door, mirrors the master's living quarters, the most intimate and inaccessible courtyard of the residence.⁵⁰

The pictorial pattern of the murals on Yongtai's walls also follows the protocol and grandeur given to imperial family members of the Tang dynasty, with guards, palace maids, and architectural structures that would have been significant in Yongtai's life. The side walls of the tomb path begin with a unit of guards, mirroring the protection afforded to Yongtai in life and now in the afterlife to protect her body. Following these guards is yet another group of armed male guards who appear to defend the capital's gates, as alluded to in the watch-towers (Figure 1.6). These watch-towers both symbolize the prosperous Tang dynasty of Yongtai's time and also confirm her place and legitimacy

⁴⁸ Benn, *Chinas Golden Age*, 75. The ritualistic nature of Tang life was also manifested in the architectural structure of the halls in elite residences. It was decreed that halls of the elite class in the third grade and above could not have more than five bays on the long side and three on the short side.

⁴⁹ Yi, Han and Chang, *Highlights of the Tang*, 126.

⁵⁰ Fong, "Four Chinese Royal Tombs," 310.

within an imperial family whose status was previously stripped by Wu Zetian; these architectural structures trace their lineage to the Han practice of using towers to signify imperial honor and status.⁵¹

In addition to providing a glimpse of the physical protection and rituals surrounding Yongtai, the placement of the iconography within her tomb also shows the importance of cosmological beliefs in Tang society. The ceilings of Yongtai's tomb depict patterns of auspicious flowers and cranes flying amidst floating clouds, a motif that expresses the desire for immortality found in the afterlife.⁵² The positioning of the cranes on the ceiling of the tomb demonstrates the Tang-era understanding of paradise as a universe literally above the mortal realm, transforming the entire tomb into the passageway to an immortal paradise. Known as the Four Deities or Four Numina, cosmological animals often decorate the walls of the front chambers of tombs. Rooted in Han motifs, they include the blue-green dragon of the East, the white tiger of the West, the vermilion bird of the North, and the dark warrior of the North, depicted as a serpent wrapped around a tortoise. However, only the white tiger and the blue-green dragon are present in Yongtai's tomb, lining the hallway of the entrance.⁵³ The epitaph of Yongtai (Figure 1.7) also reflects the Tang adoration of their own astrological motifs. Its borders depict the twelve cosmological animals at twelve-hour periods, replacing the traditional Han cosmological symbols on the epitaph, but still echoing the traditional Han animal motifs of the dragon and tiger in the hallway.⁵⁴ The novel presence of these Tang

⁵¹ Fong, "Four Chinese Royal Tombs," 310.

⁵² Fong, "Four Chinese Royal Tombs," 324.

⁵³ Mary H. Fong, "Antecedents of Sui-Tang Burial Practices in Shaanxi," *Artibus Asiae* 51, no. 3/4 (1991): 156.

⁵⁴ Fong, "Antecedents of Sui-Tang," 332. The twelve astrological animals are the horse, mouse, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, ram, monkey, rooster, dog and pig.

astrological motifs, amplifies the weight of cosmic belief within Tang society and how they viewed the significance of figures' orientations within a space. They believed that the cosmological symbols present within the tomb gave the static wall murals the ability to transcend their earthly medium and thrive within the immortal realm.⁵⁵

The strong conviction that figures transformed from images on the wall into spiritual entities derived not only from the traditional notion of winged deities and immortal realms but also the widespread Tang cultural belief in magic and illusion. This concept of mysticism arrived via the Silk Road in the second century BCE, when Buddhist monks from India, recognizing the widespread belief in the supernatural, used the craft of magic to attract more followers to the faith. In the Tang dynasty, the people continued to be fascinated with illusionism and had developed their own popular traditions of magic, with acts ranging from dismemberment and reattachment of body parts to vanishing and transformational acts.⁵⁶ This form of magic was extremely common among both the citizenry and the imperial family as well.⁵⁷ The persistence of these seemingly magical and illusionistic possibilities reinforced the notion that these murals could in fact come to life.

⁵⁵ These cosmological motifs were also echoed in bronze mirrors found in tombs during the Tang dynasty that evidenced the importance of cosmology in the construction of tombs. For more information, see Lothar Von. Falkenhausen, Suzanne E. Cahill, and K. E. Brashier, *The Lloyd Cotsen Study Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors* (Los Angeles, CA: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2009), 41.

⁵⁶ Benn, *Chinas Golden Age*, 162.

⁵⁷ Xiu Ouyang and Song Qi, *New Book of Tang*, 10 vols. (1060 CE) 1:4, accessed August 24, 2018, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=182378>. Renowned magician Ming Chong Yan was well respected by both the Emperor Gaozong and Wu Zetian. Ming would often be present at sacrificial ceremonies and called upon for advice on the interpretation of will of spirits, evidencing the close ties between the magical and spiritual realm.

The Palace Maid Murals

Beyond the illusions, cosmological creatures, and watch towers, and deeper within the tomb halls, drawings of horses and weapons reemphasize the fanfare and protection given to Yongtai in both life and death.⁵⁸ In the inner chambers, these protective guardians are replaced by palace maids (Figure 1.8). Groups of life-sized women adorn the walls of the inner chambers of the tomb; they are present both to serve their master and to symbolize the ritualized structure of Yongtai's courtly life. These palace maids, who would have served Yongtai in the mortal realm, represent the palace system of household management, which strictly defined the duties of women within the palace and emphasized the rigidity of women's roles. These six major divisions operated by women, also signify the feminine spaces that women were confined to even during the socially liberal era of the Tang, as the work assigned to them was comprised strictly of domestic crafts.⁵⁹ Before the Tang dynasty, female beauties and women in general were never subjects of aesthetic painting. Consistent with Confucian doctrines, women were only depicted in a manner that would convey a virtue or model proper behavior within an ordered society. However, under the foreign rulers of the Sui and Tang and their inclinations towards Buddhism, works depicting the female figure in an aesthetically pleasing way, outside the Confucian context, flourished. This untraditional artistic

⁵⁸ Benn, *Chinas Golden Age*, 309.

⁵⁹ Benn, *Chinas Golden Age*, 320. The six major divisions were the Departments of Palace Affairs, Ceremonials, Costumes, Food, Sleeping Quarters and Needlework.

progression is exemplified in Yongtai's palace maid murals, which were painted with exceptionally developed technique.⁶⁰

These thirty processional palace maids are located on the eastern and western walls of the front inner chamber that leads into the innermost section which houses Yongtai's body. The maids are separated into four distinct sections by vermilion borders that resemble the posts of a portico or the frame of a paneled screen. The organization of the women within each section is similar with groups of ordinary palace maids led by a head maid. Each maid holds an item that Yongtai would need in the afterlife, such as round fans, flywhisks, lighted candles, and other daily necessities.⁶¹ These everyday items common in the occupant's mortal life, were chosen to be depicted in the murals as they signified a personalized iconography within the tomb. Each head palace maid is distinct in her focused demeanor, highly piled hairstyle, and folded arms.⁶² These leading palace maids appear as the only figures in the procession whose hands are hidden and who do not carry any items. This factor, along with the high hairstyle associated with an elevated status, the position at the head of the group, and the absence of a subservient posture, has led to debate over the possibility that these head palace maids may actually be depictions of Yongtai herself.⁶³ As the tomb is modeled after the mortal palace of

⁶⁰ Mary H. Fong, "Tang Tomb Murals Reviewed in the Light of Tang Texts on Painting," *Artibus Asiae* 45, no. 1 (1984): 54.

⁶¹ Benn, *Chinas Golden Age*, 320.

⁶² There has been extensive scholarly debate on the significance of palace maid hairstyles and their symbolic meanings within Tang dynasty tomb murals. See Bing Wang, "Tang Mu Bi Hua Zhong De Fun Nv Fa Shi," *Dong Nan Wen Hua* 6 (2004): 83-90 and Benn, *Chinas Golden Age*, 110.

⁶³ Yi, Han and Chang in *Highlights of the Tang Dynasty*, 126 and Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 77. However, according to Wu Hung's scholarship on tombs, formal funerary portraits had almost entirely disappeared from tomb ritual tradition by the time Tang aristocratic tombs were constructed.

Yongtai, I believe it is highly unlikely that she would be portrayed outside the inner chambers of her quarters, or the sacred realm of the inner tomb where her body lies.⁶⁴

With the discovery of the palace maid murals, scholars were captivated by the sophisticated style and the realistic movement of the life-sized palace maids. In light of the scarcity of other extant Tang dynasty paintings, the relative completeness and vivid colors that characterized the figures provide a brief yet defining glimpse of Tang dynasty figure painting.⁶⁵ The use of the even-width silk thread line is a sign of the mural painter's expertise. This line is characterized by the illusion of thinness from afar that, on closer examination, is actually thick and heavy (Figure 1.9). Scholar Mary H. Fong attributes this purposeful illusion to the size of the palace maids themselves: due to their lifelike scale, it would have been necessary for the artist to paint a heavy line so the outline would be clear, defined and visible to the viewer from afar. The true skill of the artist can be seen in his ability to create a line that is at once bold, yet also light and flexible. The manipulation of the line is most prominent in the lining of the palace maids' clothing and figural outline (Figure 1.10). The silk thread line appears faint and delicate, giving the maids a light and dainty quality and an almost otherworldly appearance, as if they had already been transported to the spiritual realm. The lines in the necks, cleavages, and skirt pleats, however, are clearly defined, emphasizing their corporeality and placing the figures firmly back into the mortal realm. This illusionism of the silk thread line

⁶⁴ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 76-77. According to Wu Hung, the portrayal of representative figures in tombs, popular in the northern dynasties, was not embraced by the southern dynasties where the Tang dynasty originated. While the Tang embraced the structures of northern tombs, they rejected the portrayal of the deceased within the tomb, as seen from the lack of portraiture in Tang elite tombs.

⁶⁵ Yi, Han, Chang, *Highlights of the Tang Dynasty*, 126. The candles are the only items that appear on the eastern murals but absent on the western wall. This has led some historians to conclude that the eastern wall depicts a night scene, necessitating the use of candles.

defines the smooth fluidity of the figures and suggests, rather than defines, the forms.⁶⁶ This meticulously drawn line gives the life-sized palace maids the illusion of movement, almost fluctuating between the mortal and the spiritual realms—with the ethereal appearance reminiscent of the spiritual world and the clearly defined lines of the figures representing the solidity of the corporeal realm. The realistic style employed on an unprecedented level by Tang tomb painters was intended to persuasively portray the possibility that these paintings could come alive and exert control in their space. The intertwining of the physical and spiritual realms in Tang painting, conveyed through the line style of the palace maids, meant that if these paintings could interact with the viewer in the mortal world because of their realistic, developed depiction, they would also be able to exert the same control and agency in the afterlife.

An example of a painting so realistic that it could be regarded as corporeal, can be traced back to a famous anecdote concerning artist Cao Buxing and the ruler of the Wu kingdom, Sun Quan (r.222-52 CE). Cao Buxing was tasked by Sun Quan with painting a screen and while he was doing so, he accidentally dropped his brush, blotting the silk screen. Attempting to cover his mistake, he modified the ink blot into the image of a fly. According to the tale, Sun Quan found the drawing of the fly so realistic, that he tried to swat the insect off the screen.⁶⁷ Sun Quan's belief in the illusion demonstrates the willingness of the viewer to believe in the power of the artist's hand and the capability of an illusion becoming a reality. In this tale, the skill of the artist and the realism that he

⁶⁶ Fong, "Tang Tomb Murals," 56. The illusion of the thick line has led some scholars to believe that the line is actually "iron-wire", the same type of line utilized for Buddhist figure painting. However, Fong argues that the "iron-wire" line is taut and stiff, allowing no room for fluidity, as seen in the silk-thread line.

⁶⁷ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 16.

employs in his drawing, transforms the passive, static drawing of the fly into a living creature, which according to Sun Quan, had its own form of agency and even the audacity to land upon the emperor's screen.

The murals also provide a defining example of the use of chiaroscuro in early Chinese painting, a technique that enhances their naturalistic nature.⁶⁸ According to the *Rites of Zhou*, in order to achieve the illusion of a three dimensional figure and its vitality within the work, in Chinese painting tradition and ritual, the order of the application of colors was carefully prescribed, with white added last.⁶⁹ This early formula of using light to impart volume to a subject reveals the desire of painters to portray an illusionistic figure, genuine enough to regard as real. This same use of white highlights, as detailed in the *Rites of Zhou*, is evident in the folds of the clothes that the palace maids are wearing. On the south mural of the east wall, there is also dramatic use of chiaroscuro to convey the depth and movement of drapery. A darker, heavier brushstroke appears on the bodices of the maids' garments, while white paint has been applied to the train of the skirt, heightening the contrast of the shadows to produce an appearance of depth. White pigment, applied to the maids' shawls, reveals the angles of the shoulders and further enhances the sense of motion—as the women are walking, the light seems to reflect off their shoulders, as if the maids are moving and interacting with one another.

Such use of chiaroscuro reflects the skill of Tang artists and their profound desire to bring individual distinguishing features and poses to an otherwise repetitious motif.

⁶⁸ Mary H. Fong, "The Technique of Chiaroscuro in Chinese Painting from Han through T'ang." *Artibus Asiae* 38, no. 2/3 (1976): 91. Fong has suggested that chiaroscuro was not foreign, but perhaps indigenous to the Chinese people, although less appreciated and developed compared to the calligraphic style.

⁶⁹ Fong, "The Technique of Chiaroscuro," 93. According to the *Rites of Zhou*, the colors of a painting had to be followed as such: "Green and white are to be placed next to each other, likewise red and black, and similarity hsuan (jade color) and yellow. In every painting, white should be applied after (all the other colors are painted in)".

Although the artists were able to achieve something approaching Western naturalism in the depiction of the palace maids, the very term naturalism held a more complex meaning for the Chinese tomb mural painter. By employing chiaroscuro and a variety of broad and thin brushstrokes in the treatment of the maids' clothing, the painter captured not only an unprecedented visual naturalism but also the "sublime spirit," a principle Chinese artists regarded as central to their sense of realistic painting. According to Zhang Yuan Yan (c. 815-877 CE), a Chinese art historian, painter and calligrapher of the late Tang dynasty, the sublime spirit is manifested in a painting when the conception of the painting has been formed in the mind of the artist and transferred through his natural brushwork onto the painted surface.⁷⁰ This understanding of the "sublime spirit" is elaborated by the tenth century painter Qing Hao in his essay, "A Note on the Art of Brush" which states "Naturalism means to achieve the form of the object but leave out the spirit. Realism means that the forces of both the spirit and substance are strong."⁷¹ In Chinese thought, realism, or perhaps better understood as illusionism, was a philosophical truth and reality, manifested through the "sublime spirit". Qing Hao's explanation of the "sublime spirit" reveals the ancient Chinese belief that a naturalistic depiction of a subject together with the "sublime spirit" gives life and the illusion of reality to the form. To the Chinese artist, the naturalistic rendering of a figure is a presentation of an illusionistic realism.⁷² One of the six founding principles of Chinese painting, *qiyun shengdong* or "animation through 'spirit consonance'," further demonstrates the close intertwining of Chinese naturalism and realism. The *qiyun shengdong* principle means that the figures painted by an artist

⁷⁰ Fong, "The Technique of Chiaroscuro," 119.

⁷¹ Fong, "The Technique of Chiaroscuro," 119.

⁷² Martin Joseph Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang, *A Companion to Chinese Art* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 132.

should come alive or be imparted with a living spirit due to their naturalistic representation.⁷³ In Yongtai's tomb, the artist's ability to integrate both spirit and naturalistic corporeal representation in his depiction of the palace maids within the border of the mortal and immortal realm is what enables the palace maids to come alive as solid, active spiritual entities in the afterlife.

Not only does the palace maid's natural form present a heightened sense of realism, but their composition is also suggestive of a form of assertive agency that was uncommon in the female form prior to the Tang dynasty. A sense of feminine agency can be found in the depiction of the female gaze on the south mural of the eastern wall—a compositional discrepancy in the murals (Figure 1.11). Amidst the plentitude of figures within the tomb, this particular palace maid is the lone painted figure that appears to be aware of the viewer. Clothed in a green robe and delicately grasping a flywhisk, the maid fully faces the viewer, an unusual depiction of a woman in early Chinese painting.⁷⁴ Art historian James Cahill has suggested that the gaze in Chinese painting suggests the presence of a spiritual entity.⁷⁵ With the figure's eyes fixed upon the viewer, there is a shared connection and the spirit of the depicted figure is thought to be held and concentrated in its place.⁷⁶ Cahill's interpretation of the gaze is particularly apt for this palace maid. While the procession around her exudes movement and propels the viewer's steps towards the innermost chamber, the maid seems both fixed and transfixed in her space. Her eyes are locked on the viewer, immobilizing her and interrupting the viewer's

⁷³ Powers and Tsiang, *A Companion to Chinese Art*, 120.

⁷⁴ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 99.

⁷⁵ Powers and Tsiang, *A Companion to Chinese Art*, 119. Ancient Chinese painters stressed the importance of painting a figure's eyes. It was considered a ritualistic act that would summon a spirit into the image.

⁷⁶ James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-century Chinese Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 112.

gaze as it follows the otherwise smooth procession of the other women. She is the singular motionless figure, despite the animated treatment of the folds of her clothes, which are drawn in a similar fashion to the other women's attire in the frame. In addition to the steadiness of her gaze, her cloud shoes signify her immobile stance: the tops of both shoes are visible and the hem of her dress rests atop her shoes, as if she has stopped and turned to face the viewer.⁷⁷ In contrast, the other palace maids only reveal one of their shoes, indicating that they are mid-gait in procession towards the entrance of the coffin chamber. The style of this particular palace maid, who gazes boldly outward, suggests an underlying assertiveness enhanced by the realistic treatment, which almost makes her appear 'alive'. This depiction of the gaze represents a new form of active agency and control given to the Tang woman in a feminine space.

In traditional Chinese painting, the female subject rarely acknowledges the gaze of the viewer, even if she is situated in a fully frontal position, like the other palace maid south side of the east wall (Figure 1.12). This maid, clothed in red on the eastern mural, faces the viewer, but her eyes are cast to the side, away from the viewer, and in keeping with the artistic and societal conventions of depicting women in Chinese painting. The implication of the gaze rests on the treatment of the figure's pupils—where the artist determines whether the figure's eyes will be turned towards the viewer or to the side. This is the moment in traditional Chinese painting when the image transforms from passive entity into living representation.⁷⁸ However, unlike the palace maid whose gaze meets the viewer and thus arrests movement of the scene, this maid's downcast eyes are

⁷⁷ Denise Patry Leidy, *How to Read Chinese Ceramics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 31. Popular at the Tang court in the seventh century, cloud shoes were characterized by their upturned toes, as seen in the Yongtai murals and Tang dynasty *mingqi* as well.

⁷⁸ Cahill, *The Compelling Image*, 112.

not forceful enough to interrupt the procession. Rather, her offset gaze suggests a reluctance to disturb the fluidity of the frame and an unwillingness to establish an outward bond with the viewer.

Although the outward gaze was an unusual concept in ancient Chinese painting, it is quite pervasive in Tang painting and produce similar effects of dominance and passivity in the domestic setting, as in the palace maid in Yongtai's tomb. A silk scroll by Zhou Fang (780-810 CE), *Court Ladies Playing Double-Sixes* (Figure 1.13) demonstrates the Tang tradition of using a downcast gaze to convey a sense of passivity within a domestic setting, like that of Yongtai's inner chamber. This painting also bears similarity to the palace maid murals in its overall sense of movement. The two maids on the left lift a heavy vase as the two seated women play chess. At far right, a eunuch carries a tray while another maid calmly assesses the players captivated by their game. Another two maids stand over the women playing double-sixes, with the maid on the left draping her arm over the other maid, the twists and folds in her clothes suggesting an action full of motion. Like the palace maid murals, this scene is one of domesticity; its narrative belongs to the inner quarters of an imperial residence. Additionally, this work includes a fully frontal face, although the eyes of this maid are turned to her companion. The fluid composition of the scroll is not halted; rather, the woman's inward gaze towards the other woman emphasizes the relationship of the two figures, maintaining overall unity of the painting. Here, as in the northern palace mural of the east wall, the maid's passive gaze allows for a smooth and uninterrupted narrative flow. The figure that faces the viewer, though compositionally central, blends almost seamlessly into the horizontal movement of the painting, due to her averted gaze.

Another Tang dynasty scroll that explores both the potential of the individual female gaze within a larger group, *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* (Figure 1.14), is attributed to Zhang Xuan, a court painter whose birth and death years are unknown. This painting, like the palace maid murals, depicts a group of women performing domestic duties, like the pounding of white silk. The twelve women are also divided into distinct groups. Although the meaning of these divisions within the palace maid murals is not clear, in *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*, the women are clearly organized by their various roles in the silk-making process. Read from right to left, this painting shows groups of women pounding, sewing and ironing silk. The outward feminine gaze, absent on the northern east wall in Yongtai's tomb and in *Court Ladies Playing Double Sixes*, is present in a dominant fashion here. In the first section of women pounding silk, a court lady dressed in vibrant red and blue robes gazes directly forward. She appears firmly in place, leaning upon her wooden tool as if to steady herself. As she adjusts her sleeve, she peers out at the viewer. Amidst the commotion of silk making, this motionless figure seems to exert a control over the viewer's gaze, requiring a pause in the horizontal reading of the work. Her distinctive gaze effectively removes her from the realm of her companions, as though her outward stare breaks the internal coherence of the women's relationships (Figure 1.15). In the third section, depicting the ironing of silk, a young court lady peers frontally outward, but her gaze is turned to the woman who holds the roll of silk. This positioning of figures bears striking resemblance to the Yongtai murals, with one frame featuring an outwardly staring woman and an adjoining frame showing a similarly oriented figure but with a downcast gaze (Figure 1.16). As with the palace maid whose eyes were cast to the side, the young

woman in *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* does not diverge from the standard gaze. Although she faces the viewer, she does not look directly upon the viewer, an act of potential dominance. Instead, her eyes suggest a passivity and allows for a seamlessly uninterrupted narrative. These examples demonstrate how the Tang artists manipulated the eyes and orientations of figures in relation to the physical location of the viewer to convey subtle differentiations between power and passivity that are also visible in the minute details, stylization and positioning of the Yongtai murals.

The spacing of the women of the two eastern murals further evokes a contrast of severity in one and harmony in another. In the mural on the north side of the east wall, with the forward-facing woman in red, the maids walk closely together, with a sense of determination in the coordinated harmony that envelopes their world. Perhaps it is their closer proximity to the coffin chamber's entrance that underlies their severe expressions, underscored by the maid's seeming aversion to meeting the gaze of the viewer that would potentially disrupt the women's unity within the frame. (Figure 1.17) In contrast, the placement of the women of the mural on the south side of the east wall is sparser, although there are more women present. The first six are tightly grouped, their proximity suggesting the same homogenous harmony of their northern counterparts. However, this cohesiveness is broken by a large area of empty space, a space that is bare because of the palace maid who meets the viewer's gaze. Her assertive stare severs the internal relationship and fluidity of the other maids, and her immobile stance breaks the physically cohesive nature of the group. The ability of the lone female gaze to change the continuous stylistic narrative of the mural, as well as to suggest the active behavior of a

palace maid, attests to the Tang painters' exploration of novel methods in pursuit of figures with a sense of agency and vivacity.⁷⁹

The orientation of these palace murals has puzzled many art historians. They do not form a continuous progression from the entrance of the inner chamber into the burial chamber. Rather, the mural on the north side of the east chamber faces the exit of the inner chamber, while the mural on the south side of the east chamber faces the burial chamber (Figure 1.18). This same pattern is repeated on the western walls. The placement of the palace maids facing one another creates thus two disconnected narratives on each side of the tomb, breaking with the established pictorial program of a cohesive narrative as seen in the bell towers, gate towers, and officials lining the passageway of the tomb (Figure 1.19). The women in each section do not acknowledge the women outside of their frame, nor are they aware that were they indeed realistically within a single portico, their forward procession would soon see them colliding directly with another group of palace maids. The orientation of the maids on the northern side of each wall, in addition to the disjunction of the pictorial program, presents a static narrative at odds with the more naturalistic, dynamic movement conveyed by the treatment and poses of the figures.

The ability of the female form and gaze to control the narrative progress of the viewer reflects the power and agency of the women present in Yongtai's palace maid murals. I would suggest that there is an emergent female agency within this established feminine space, further echoed in the novel realism adopted by Tang artists. These artists have convincingly portrayed these women in a realistic style that underlies the Tang contemporaneous belief that these otherwise lifeless figures indeed possessed the ability

⁷⁹ Cahill, *The Compelling Image*, 114.

to exert a similar control in the afterlife as they do in the mortal realm. This reading of the assertive palace maid is further strengthened if these murals are understood as representations of paneled screens—the actual fixtures that delineated the female space. Such an interpretation presents a possible explanation for the unusual orientation of the palace maids. In the following chapter, I will explore the potential of these palace maid murals as screens, highly naturalistic representations of agency within a feminine space and within layers of the tomb structure.

Chapter 2

Tomb Murals as Screens

Paneled screens, a fixture that traditionally denotes a feminine space, were common objects in the homes of the Tang elite, including that of Princess Yongtai. I will argue these wall murals, themselves meant to delineate a feminine space with the presence of palace maids, are actually representations of screens. Art historian Wu Hung's scholarship on screens locates the screen's main virtue in its multiple points of reference: as object, painting medium, pictorial representation or combination of the three.⁸⁰ All three forms have been found within imperial Chinese tombs and the screen as both object and painting medium is exemplified in Yongtai's palace maid murals. Wu's framework for understanding the screen, upon which my reading relies, derives from his discussion of the screen as an indicator of both a space and a place. A place is differentiated from a space in its ability to be defined empirically. A screen's primary function is to establish a space; it defines and qualifies two interdependent areas—one shielded behind the screen and one on the outside. According to Wu, the person within the area blocked by the screen has become temporarily hidden and the space in which the person finds himself thereby becomes a place, with the occupant becoming the owner of said place.⁸¹ The screen, as in Tang dynasty elite homes, serves to demarcate a reception area from the inner quarters and also to maintain the privacy of the master's intimate

⁸⁰ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 9.

⁸¹ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 10.

chambers. Established by the presence of the screen, each space is transformed into a place that is “definable, manageable and obtainable.”⁸²

Drawing on Wu’s definition of the screen as a marker of space and place and considering the positioning of the murals within the tomb’s innermost chamber I argue that the murals were intended to represent screens. Based on the parallel layout of elite Tang homes and the multi-chambered units within Yongtai’s tomb, the inner and coffin chambers thus reference the domestic, inner quarters of an aristocratic Tang home. The private courtyards in such Tang residences were sectioned off from the outer world. Within these intimate quarters, the screens defined the feminine, domestic space and place of the Tang woman. In this residential context, screens functioned as a marker of both space and place. The space was defined by the actual physicality of the screen; which blocks the gaze of onlookers into the place created by the screen.⁸³

Such a feminine space is also established within Yongtai’s inner chamber if the palace maid murals are understood as screens. The murals adorn the walls of the inner chamber immediately preceding the room housing Yongtai’s body. As the preceding murals transition from a pictorial pattern of exterior iconography, like that of bell towers and soldiers, to a more domestic and feminine schema of women and eunuchs, there is a recognizable shift signaling the end of the outward-facing portion of the tomb and the beginning of the interior quarters. The palace maid murals emphasize this difference in space through their scene of a female procession. Additionally, as screens, the murals physically delineate the space as a feminine one, domestic and private, yet another parallel between the mortal Tang residence and the afterlife. The pictorial separation of

⁸² Wu, *The Double Screen*, 9.

⁸³ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 125.

the inner and outer chambers is echoed by a similar actual separation of the inner and outer chambers, which are divided by a stone door (Figure 2.1). In the burial process, the inner chambers were the first to be sealed behind the stone door, barring any outside entities from entering. The outer chambers and the walkway leading to the entrance of the tomb were later filled with earth and sealed, burying all of the outer murals only after the respects were paid.⁸⁴ As the burial process accentuates the privacy of the inner chambers and given the ubiquity of screens in the domestic quarters of Tang elite homes, the household fixtures that define the ritualized space of Tang residences also find their place within Yongtai's ritualized tomb space.

In addition to serving as a divider of a space, the screen also housed images, both external and internal signifiers, within a rectangular frame.⁸⁵ According to Wu and other scholars, the screen's function as a frame serves two purposes—to create boundaries and transitions between realities and to establish a hierarchy of contexts.⁸⁶ These functions, rooted in Zhou ceremonial ritual, are external signifiers; they represent the ritualized space projected from the presence of a screen. The screen indicates a specific area that conveys to the viewer that this space and place is governed by ritual and tradition, dictated by the owner of the space. In Yongtai's tomb, the palace maid murals, nestled within a rectangular frame that strongly recalls a screen, represent both the boundary and the transition to a different kind of reality—one with its own space, time, ideas and behaviors. Spatially, they demarcate the physical boundary between the exterior and the interior of the tomb. The ritual practices and traditions of the private and public realms of

⁸⁴ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 217.

⁸⁵ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 13.

⁸⁶ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 13.

the manor, beginning in the Han dynasty and continuing into the Tang, were both defined and embodied by the presence of screens within the imperial home. Within the distinct interior and exterior spaces, there are clear boundaries of ideas and behavior. As in the mortal realm where men were not allowed to face the women of the household, within the tomb these screens separate the genders, with appropriate behavior expected from each side. This interpretation is furthered by the lack of distinctive male figures on the murals and the absence of political processions and hunting scenes in the inner chambers. Such ideas and pursuits were considered part of the external, male world and were thus inappropriate for the inner chamber of a Princess' tomb, a feminine and interior space shielded and defined by screens.

Screens can also signify an arrangement or hierarchy, as the place created by a screen is often reserved as a place of power. In Yongtai's tomb, the screen defines the inner chamber where Yongtai's body is housed. It is a place reserved solely for the deceased. It is a special place that is shielded and bordered by the "screen", a place in which Yongtai's spirit is protected. It also establishes a hierarchy of superiority within the tomb: Yongtai is the master behind the screen; the place of utmost honor is reserved for her. These deepest, most intimate chambers represent the apex of the architectural hierarchy within the tomb, protecting both the spirit and the body of the deceased, thus allowing the soul to make a smooth ascension into immortal paradise.⁸⁷

The screen as a tomb fixture delineating space and a place has been found in tombs ranging from the Han to the Tang dynasties. Their physical features of being enclosed within a rectangular frame and featuring feminine subject matter are signifiers

⁸⁷ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 217.

of traditional screens within the tomb. A Tang dynasty tomb at Wangcui in Chang'an, Shaanxi, dated to the eighth century, contains such painted screen murals. The six-paneled *Screen of Ladies Under Trees* (Figure 2.2) was believed to have surrounded a coffin in the tomb's inner chamber. There, it would have divided the external and internal chambers of the tomb, echoing the division of Yongtai's tomb. The women on these screens, like most of the maids within Yongtai's tomb murals, are depicted in profile, interacting with one another. The portrayal of the women in this scene represents the dualistic tradition of fictive surfaces within Chinese art. The longstanding idea that a surface can be made to give the appearance of a different surface material, imparts to the object a dualistic function.⁸⁸ The idea of a fictive surface is embodied in a theatricality where one surface represents another—the two surfaces would not be ambiguous in appearance beyond the realm of the fictive surface. This manipulation of the surface and the viewer's perception is intended to draw the viewer into the metaphorical space created by the fictive surfaces.⁸⁹ In the case of Yongtai's murals, this dualistic nature can be found in the twofold representation of the palace maid murals as both a functional screen and a painted, rocky surface that facilitates the movement of palace maids traveling between the separated chambers of the tomb. Read as physical screens, the palace maid murals as a fictive surface, can be seen as boundaries, establishing a place specific to the occupant of the tomb and drawing the viewer into the metaphorical space dictated by the screens. This dualism is reiterated in the *Screen of Ladies Under Trees* at the Wangcui tomb, in which the panels are simultaneously painted on the tomb's rocky

⁸⁸ Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 215.

⁸⁹ Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 216.

surface, while also representing a delicate screen. Within the painting, the women are shown in their garden paradise, completely immersed in their fictive painted world and functioning as décor. Unlike Yongtai's murals, where the maids form a unidirectional procession within each panel, the women in this six-panel screen are depicted as leisurely and passive, languidly posed within the landscape. The presence of this screen and its feminine narrative within the private chambers of the Tang-era Wangcui tomb, as well as its fictive, dualistic surface, supports the possibility that tomb murals were indeed adorned with screens in order to represent and establish a particular space and place.⁹⁰

Another tomb that houses definitive examples of murals as screens was recently discovered in 2013 at the Guozhuang Tang tomb in Xi'an. This tomb belonged to Han Xiu (672-739 CE), a chancellor who served the Tang dynasty Emperor Xuanzong (713-756).⁹¹ A recent discovery of a landscape screen in Han Xiu's tomb, continues the trend for horizontal Tang screens and supports the possibility that the Yongtai palace maid murals could also be read as screens.⁹² The most captivating part of Han Xiu's inner chamber is the vermillion-bordered mural landscape that distinctly embodies Wu's concept of a screen. This mural is positioned on the tomb's north wall, directly adjacent to Han Xiu's coffin. The container of the *hun* and *po*, it is a space of utmost sacredness, the site of the smooth transition of the individual from the mortal to the immortal realm. This screen thus establishes a space and a place: a space designated as one to be treated with respect and honor, and a place marked by the screen, which establishes Han Xiu as the central and authoritative figure of the tomb. In a literal sense, the screen itself serves

⁹⁰ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 101.

⁹¹ "Han Xiu Mu," Dao Bai Ke Shou Ye, accessed November 23, 2018, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/韩休墓>.

⁹² Wu, *The Double Screen*, 167.

as a frame and divider of space for the most important entity within the tomb—Hanxiu’s body. Stylistically, this mural exemplifies the maturity of landscape painting in the Tang dynasty and the taste for realism. The presence of this horizontal screen and the definitive space and place it establishes, again, heightens the possibility that horizontal screens were common fixtures within tombs.⁹³

Another means of understanding Yongtai’s palace maid murals as screens, establishing both a space and a place within the mortal and immortal realms, is through the incorporation of *liqi*, or ritual paraphernalia.⁹⁴ As outlined by Chinese archaeologist Wu Ruzuo, *liqi* must conform to four criteria: they are only found in tombs and not in the physical and residential sphere; they only appear in the tombs of the elite; they are found separate from ordinary vessels and placed with other ritual and ceremonial objects; and they could not have been used in daily life. For Wu Ruzuo, the defining characteristic of *liqi* was their removal from human use.⁹⁵ They are objects that encompass the regulations of ceremonial practices, personal behavior, and conduct, physical manifestations of *li*, or ritual. Though *li* itself, an abstract idea of Confucianism, could not be created or obtained by an individual, it was necessary for all to practice it, for it was only through the universal practice of *li* that social society could function well. A power to be exercised but not wielded over an inferior group, *li*, as described in the tomes of ritual, embodied the power of life itself, which was enhanced by rituals performed on and around it.⁹⁶ This understanding of the *liqi* extends beyond the physical objects and entities within a tomb

⁹³ “Chinese Ink Paintings Line the Walls of Ancient Tomb,” The State Council the People’s Republic of China, updated November 23, 2014, accessed November 23, 2018, http://english.gov.cn/news/video/2014/11/23/content_281475014188873.htm.

⁹⁴ Wu, *Monumentality*, 24. This is not to be confused with *yongqi*, which was ritual paraphernalia that was strictly utilitarian in nature.

⁹⁵ Wu, *Monumentality*, 27.

⁹⁶ Wu, *Monumentality*, 71.

ritual and to the murals qua screens. Although these murals are non-structural objects within the mortal realm, and thus not *liqi* per se, they were thought of as tangible, structural objects to the spirits of the netherworld, implying that in the transition to the immortal realm, the wall's images, as *liqi*, become a reality for the spirits. It is therefore possible that the rules of the *liqi* also apply to these objects that span the physical and spiritual realms.⁹⁷ The palace maid murals within Yongtai's inner tomb can be understood as a living and powerful physical entity, governed by this definition of *liqi*—objects removed from their motionless position on the wall and becoming embodied with the understandings of a physical screen in the immortal realm.

Although screens were common in life, the actual screen of the mortal realm was composed of more delicate materials, like wood and paper, instead of the hard, rocky material found in tombs.⁹⁸ As tomb murals require the walls of multi-chambered tombs as their medium and carefully prepared surfaces, they are found primarily in tombs of the elite. Their location in the inner chamber sets them apart from quotidian vessels, bringing them closer to ritualized and ceremonial objects, like *mingqi*. This painted palace mural thus fits within the historical understanding of the *liqi* as a ritual object that establishes both space and place; here, a feminine space, constituted by the societal rituals of the mortal realm. The *liqi* as an embodiment of the power of life also emphasizes the agency of the established female space. The palace maid murals are stylistically natural but their characterization as *liqi*, further allows for the depicted subjects to possess lifelike vivacity within the spiritual realm, a potential heightened and enhanced by their persuasive and

⁹⁷ Wu, *Monumentality*, 71.

⁹⁸ John C. Ferguson, "Furniture," in *Survey of Chinese Art* (Taipei, Taiwan: Commercial Press, 1972), 113-114.

powerful realism. The Yongtai palace maid murals, if viewed as screens of the *liqi* category, thus reinforce the idea of the maids' potential agency, establishing them as lifelike, active characters within a feminine space.

The Feminine Space in the Tomb

The tradition of a delineated and illustrated space within the tomb can be traced back to the Han dynasty, an era that the Sui and Tang used as models for their rule. The oldest known screen was found in the Han Mawangdui Tomb No.1 and dates to the second century BC (Figure 2.3). According to Wu Hung, this lacquer screen represents the ceremonial space of the inhabitant, and a distinct establishment of authoritative space, underscored by the screen's dragon motif.⁹⁹ Another example of a screen built upon Han tomb ritual traditions comes from the Northern Wei tomb of Sima Jinlong (Figure 2.4). This screen is thought to be associated with a screen produced by a Confucian scholar named Liu Xiang (77-6 BC), who sought to depict exemplary figures in order to morally instruct the viewer. Liu Xiang painted the screen based on the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (18 BC), a moral rulebook created by Liu Xiang and his son that dictates how a woman should behave to ensure a functioning, Confucian society.¹⁰⁰ A work that guided the etiquette of the imperial court, *Biographies* provides examples of model female behavior. It was also intended for the emperor's perusal, as Liu Xiang hoped that the emperor would use it to select virtuous and exemplary wives.¹⁰¹ Though this original four paneled screen no longer exists, the screen found in Sima Jinlong's tomb provides a

⁹⁹ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 13. The dragon motif is the primary symbol for sovereignty in Chinese culture, as evidenced by this screen.

¹⁰⁰ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 86.

¹⁰¹ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 86.

possible reconstruction of its form. As seen in Figure 2.4, this screen bears distinct narrative similarities in its display of women and includes filial sons and loyal ministers.¹⁰²

The placement of the male and female figures on Sima Jinlong's screen reveals a distinct separation of space that reflects Han gender norms. The panels of virtuous women are on the interior of the screen, while the male figures are depicted on the exterior. This compositional separation echoes the literal separation of genders that screens enabled. The actions of the figures also reflect the distinct gender divide of the mortal realm brought into the tomb. On the most well-preserved panel, the women depicted are all of imperial stature, including the two virtuous queens of the legendary Shun, a benevolent mother of the Eastern Zhou, and Lady Ban (Figure 2.5).¹⁰³ The presence of these imperial women reflect the elite status of the screen's owner, and also serve as instructional anecdotes.¹⁰⁴ Each of these women is shown in a ritualized manner, performing duties befitting of her gender: the women in the upper portion of the screen wash clothes, while the ladies next to them appear to listen obediently to the admonitions of a woman in a leadership position.

The woman in the last panel, Lady Ban, is also shown in an idealized, subservient manner, patiently waiting upon the emperor who rides in his sedan. In this scene, the emperor insists that she sit in the sedan with him. However, Lady Ban recognizes the improprieties of a woman doing so and refuses the emperor's offer. Instead, she walks beside the sedan, disproportionately large in comparison to other figures. This

¹⁰² Wu, *The Double Screen*, 88.

¹⁰³ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 88.

¹⁰⁴ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 89.

hierarchical scale represents her importance as an exemplary paradigm for women, reminding the viewer of the importance of appropriate gender roles and behaviors in Chinese society. These archetypal noble women, in contrast to the men of varying social statuses on the same screen, represent the multi-faceted virtuosity of the kind of women that emperors should select as their wives, as well as the higher qualifications to which these women are to be held. Their placement on the interior of the screen symbolizes not only the women's inner quarters, to which they were confined, but also the regularity with which they were judged by men; this screen would have surrounded the bed of a male elite who would have daily been reminded of the expected behaviors and duties of virtuous women in a Confucian society.¹⁰⁵

Sima Jinlong's screen was originally found beside the coffin in the tomb, leading Wu Hung to argue that its placement signifies the owner's morality, a concept valued in both the earthly domain and the afterlife. In both life and death, these images of women were not meant to be mere visual pleasures; rather, they were icons of moral instruction. Unlike the naturally rendered portraits in Yongtai's tomb, these stylistically simple women on Sima Jinlong's screens were intended only as examples of female virtue, not showpieces of realism and artistic technique.¹⁰⁶ The convention of depicting women strictly for instruction and guidance on virtue with no particular regard for a naturalistic style seems to dissipate leading up to the Tang dynasty, ultimately culminating in extremely realistic and detailed works, like Yongtai's palace maid murals. Gu Kaizhi (c. 344-406 CE), perhaps one of the most famous painters in Chinese art history for his mastery in portraying figures naturalistically, paved the way for the emergence of a

¹⁰⁵ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 88.

¹⁰⁶ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 90.

naturalism that reached a climax during the Tang. While Gu Kaizhi's exact historical identity is unknown, he specialized in scroll painting and was highly praised by Tang critics for his line drawing technique that is thought to have inspired the artists who painted Yongtai's murals.¹⁰⁷ His *Wise and Benevolent Women*, (Figure 2.6) shares the Han pictorial structure of Sima Jinlong's screen in that they both depict women as anecdotal instruction for the contemporary viewer. However, this Song copy of Gu Kaizhi's work reveals a different approach to depicting women. While the artist of Sima Jinlong's screen depicts virtuous royal women, Gu Kaizhi chose intellectual women from *Biographies of Exemplary Women* for his scroll. The women are no longer only symbolic entities of instruction; in addition to serving as models of virtue, they are also subjects of aesthetic pleasure. This more naturalistic style places greater emphasis on the individual, bringing the viewer's attention to the carefully drawn facial expressions, moving away from a generic type of woman toward specificity and portraiture. The realistic shading in the folds of the clothes and the dramatic poses of the women in their long, flowing robes, recall Yongtai's palace maids. They also represent the emergence of a new style that moves away from women as mere symbols of proper comportment and towards a female figure with her own vivacity, movement, and intellect. This naturalism suggests a kind of female agency given to the woman within the pictorial narrative, as seen in Yongtai's palace maid murals, with the mural artists' intentional use of chiaroscuro to suggest realistic movement and independent interaction between each palace maid. This stylistic change propels the subject beyond the realm of symbolic representations of female

¹⁰⁷ Richard M. Barnhart et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 47.

subservience and rather towards an environment of female agency, manifested most notably in the outward gaze of the palace maid in Yongtai's mural.

The Feminine Space in Chinese Painting

Chinese traditional painting also offers a glimpse of the conception of feminine space and domesticity during the imperial era. *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, a painting that demonstrates a typical feminine space in Chinese art, by Tang artist Zhou Fang displays similar style and composition to Yongtai's palace maid murals (Figure 2.7). Now in a handscroll medium, this long horizontal painting is actually divided into three shorter sections, a recent discovery. These divisions in the painting, now hardly noticeable, separate the scroll into three sections, with two women in each. It is believed that these panels were removed from a paneled screen that originally surrounded a bed located in the most private quarters of the elite's residence.¹⁰⁸ The court lady occupies an interior, feminine space. The ladies are surrounded by auspicious flowers as they pose theatrically for the viewer's pleasure. Their inward gazes hint at an intimacy between the pairs of court ladies and their surroundings. They turn shyly away, as if absorbed by their surroundings, seemingly reluctant to engage the viewer directly. Instead, these court ladies display an intimacy with the non-human subjects in the painting, like the flowers, animals, and birds. The court ladies and their non-human companions, along with the screen, were fixtures in many elite residences. The apparent isolation in this depiction of the court ladies within the Tang domestic space is highlighted with each repetition of the women. In the work's original form as a screen,

¹⁰⁸ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 99.

the ladies are kept company only by the non-human subjects within their respective frames, which establish a feminine space with each division.¹⁰⁹

The style of these court ladies echoes the naturalism of the Yongtai palace maid murals. Their draped shawls and serpentine posture are reminiscent of Yongtai's palace maids, with each suggesting to the viewer that the subject has only briefly stopped to smell the flowers or play with the animals. This sense of movement is emphasized throughout by the light and dark shading of court ladies' garments. Like the chiaroscuro utilized in Yongtai's palace maids, this shading technique amplifies the voluptuous nature of the clothing and the figures. Zhou Fang here demonstrates his mastery of realism through the transparent chiffon-type material worn by the women (Figure 2.8). The paint is only thinly applied, allowing the viewer a shielded glimpse of the upper and lower arms, hinting at a sensual and intimate encounter with these mysterious ladies. Their anonymity adds to their allure, enticing the viewer to approach them more closely, a trait shared by Yongtai's unidentified palace maids.¹¹⁰ This suggestive portrayal of the court ladies perhaps also indicates it was meant only for private areas of the owner's home, further emphasizing the identification of the space they inhabit as feminine, as also seen in Yongtai's murals.

The composition of *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* also bears a specific resemblance to that of Yongtai palace maid murals. In both, the court ladies are repetitive and largely symmetrical. There are also two women within each frame set against a shallow, blank background. The only suggestions of perspective are the smaller women receding in the backgrounds—one notable difference from the layered figures of

¹⁰⁹ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 99.

¹¹⁰ Barnhart et al., *Three Thousand Years*, 77-78.

the palace maid murals. The division of the screen panels is also similar to the vermillion-colored frames in Yongtai's tomb. Although this painting does not have a literal screen frame around each pair of ladies, each group is sectioned by their postures and placement. The large blank spaces between them and their apparent unawareness of the other frames effectively divide this work into three distinct sections. In the left and middle frames, the ladies face one another but do not appear to acknowledge any other pairs. This same pattern is found in Yongtai's palace maid murals, where two inward-facing groups have no recognition of the narrative beyond their frame.

Like Yongtai's maids, these court ladies also appear to belong to a hierarchy: each frame is led by a singular lady, lost in the narrative of the painting. Like the head palace maids, these leading court ladies are wholly immersed in their assigned 'tasks': in Yongtai's tomb, the head palace maids lead the group, doing so without acknowledgement of the other figures within their frame. Similarly, in *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, the women on the left of each screen panel pose with a seductive coyness, still contained within her respective narrative frame. Their counterparts also bear similarities to the ordinary palace maids within the murals. They stand stoically, follow their leader, hold fans, play with dogs—all postures that can be seen in the palace maid murals. These similarities in composition, style and narrative demonstrate Zhou Fang's adherence to traditional Tang conventions of the feminine sphere, while also pointing to the possibility that such female domestic narratives were common motifs on screens of intimate quarters in the Tang home.

Another work that portrays the feminine space and the female agency associated with such a space established by the screen is *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*, a scroll

painting by Gu Hongzhong (Figure 2.9). A Tang court painter, Gu Hongzhong was commissioned by the Southern Tang emperor Li Yu to record the famous parties of the Internal Secretary Han Xizai. The emperor had heard of these extravagantly lavish parties and desired to see them for himself.¹¹¹ This painting thus provided the emperor with a glimpse of the party, the behavior of the elite guests and the unrestrained entertainment of these legendary parties during the Southern Tang dynasty.¹¹² *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* presents a persuasive form of realism, rooted in the early Tang and seen in the palace maid murals. The women are dancing, singing and conversing in a lively manner; even their flowing of their dresses and drapery suggest vivacity and movement. Although there is a continuous narrative, like the palace maid murals, the scroll is divided into distinct sections. Instead of the vermilion colored frames of Yongtai's tomb, the divisions appear as actual horizontal screens. There are six screens in *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*, each delineating a space within the Tang elite residence. Starting at the right, the first section contains three screens, thus dividing this first space into two sections.¹¹³ The far-right screen surrounds a bed, establishing an intimate space that is not visited by the guests of the home—a characterization furthered by the tousled blankets and carelessly positioned *pipa*. (Figure 2.10).

The next screen surrounds a couch where gentlemen are gathered, gazing at a woman playing the *pipa* (Figure 2.11). The women stand and sit demurely as dictated by ritual. This section of stiff portraiture ends with a horizontal screen that delineates yet

¹¹¹ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 29.

¹¹² Hansen, *The Open Empire*, 244. The Southern Tang dynasty was one of the Ten Kingdoms in southern China, a subset of the Tang dynasty following the An Lushan rebellion. They were eventually conquered by the Song in 976, effectively bringing an end to the Tang dynasty.

¹¹³ The narrative begins on the right end of the scroll and ends on the left, as traditional Chinese scrolls are customarily read from right to left. Wu, *The Double Screen*, 58.

another space. However, this space is one of female agency. The women are no longer governed by the rigid formality of the previous section. Instead, they dance, clap and interact intimately with the men. In this portion of the painting, sectioned by the screen, the women possess more agency and freedom. They no longer appear bound by traditional behavior, as they are in the first section. Rather, they present a vivacity much like the chattering palace maids of Yongtai's tomb murals. They have agency, however, only within their own feminine space, here marked by an intimate couch bed and sectioned off by a screen. The women appear entirely at ease, not restricting their behavior to that of proper decorum, even with the presence of men within this domestic space. This is a bold action for the time, as the women identified this area as their space, both defined and limited by screens.

The same pictorial pattern is repeated in the subsequent two sections of the painting, with a third section again displaying ladies playing instruments and standing in a subservient manner, deferential to their male guests. However, this formal demeanor changes with the division of the screen. In the leftmost section, the ladies appear even more at ease with their male counterparts, casually leaning and even establishing physical contact with them. Their boldness and agency can be attributed to the establishment of this space as feminine. Although there are men present, the demeanor of the ladies seems to suggest a strong command of the space. Indeed, at the edge of this feminine space, and at the edges of Tang-era constructs of male and female, a woman attempts to lure a man into her space. However, she remains behind the screen, lest she lose her agency once outside her established space.

The difference in the ladies' demeanor within their established interior space and a traditional, external space in this Southern Tang dynasty work supports my contention that the same separation of space occurs in the palace maid mural screens within Yongtai's tomb, suggesting the murals portray a sense of agency as well. Like *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*, the palace maid murals divide the inner and exterior chambers. The tradition of delineating domestic spaces within Tang elite residences with screens suggests that *The Night Revels* provides a plausible glimpse of the screen's function as a divider of interior and exterior space and the separate behaviors that govern each space. As the ladies within the scroll painting expressed agency through their uninhibited behavior, the palace maid murals exhibit their own form of command through the direct gaze. In both, the feminine space behind the screen is that which enables their agency. The screen, as marker and medium, both defines and establishes their feminine space.

It should be noted that the tombs of Princess Yongtai and Crown Prince Yide were constructed around the same time as that of their uncle, Prince Zhanghuai. However, only Yongtai and Yide's tombs were designated as *ling*, and thus have distinct similarities in mural style and program. In particular, the palace maids are present in both inner chambers. It is possible that Yide's palace maid murals are also screens, though they lack similar themes of female agency. Yide's inner chamber would not have been a feminine space in either the mortal or spiritual realms. Additionally, within the residential sphere, male screens were used for moral instruction.¹¹⁴ Screens do not establish a specific male space. Rather, as in *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* any place within the screen is a place for the male. In contrast, only behind the screen can a woman assert

¹¹⁴ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 84.

agency and control. Perhaps most tellingly, Yide's murals lack a gaze fixed upon the viewer. In Yongtai's tomb, however, the palace maid gaze upon the viewer, asserts control and dominance, and pauses the narrative progression of the horizontal mural screen. The absence of an outward gaze within Yide's murals emblemizes the traditional behavior and rituals of Chinese women in life and paintings. There is no explicit feminine space, as there is in Gu Hongzhong's work and Yongtai's palace maid murals.

Naturalism in Chinese Painting

In a Tang copy of Gu Kaizhi's scroll painting, *Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies* (Figure 2.12), the naturalistic style of the ladies seen in Yongtai's tomb is repeated. The subtle shading to indicate depth, the use of the line to portray realistic clothes, and the realistic proportions of the figures reveal the distinct shift in style from the Han-influenced screen in Sima Jinlong's tomb. The most explicit depiction of women as more than symbolic instructional mechanisms can be seen in the section of the scroll titled *The Story of Ban Zhao* (Figure 2.10). Like the Sima Jinlong screen, this section shows Lady Ban walking along the emperor's sedan. However, compared to the static portrayals of Sima Jinlong's tomb, this scroll is lively and full of energy.¹¹⁵ The sedan-carriers no longer uniformly face a singular direction and almost appear to dance in their struggle to hoist the vehicle. In addition, the emperor no longer looks nonchalantly back at Lady Ban but instead, gazes longingly towards her. The hierarchical scale has likewise disappeared, with Lady Ban in proportion to the figures

¹¹⁵ Barnhart et al., *Three Thousand Years*, 48.

around her. She appears elegant and demure. Her gaze towards the emperor seemingly reassures him of her firm decision to walk beside the sedan. Although this work still focuses on the proper behavior of women in Chinese society, its evolving style from strictly symbolic depiction to realistic representative style demonstrates the progress of Chinese artists in depictions of women as figures that exist not only in a virtuous idyll, but in reality as well, a notion consistent with the change in attitudes towards women, manifested by the masterful manipulation of brush and line.

This more naturalistic figural style promulgated by Gu Kaizhi reaches its apex in the life-sized figures of Yongtai's murals. The naturalistic qualities of the palace maids and their presence on a "screen" suggests increasing agency for the women, who assert their authority by meeting the viewer's gaze from their position on the wall and also in their supposed ability to come alive within the tomb. What distinguishes them from the passivity and subservience of earlier female figures is their presence on a screen. The tradition of utilizing screens in tombs were prevalent during the Han dynasty, but the function of the images upon the screen were merely educational and symbolic, and the images were not intended to assert authority and leave the confines of their screens. This move towards naturalism in style coincides with the decline in the common usage of physical screens within the tomb.¹¹⁶ Instead, the physical screen is replaced by mural screens. As the paintings on the screens became more realistic, there is an inability to discern the difference between illusion and reality, negating the need for a physical

¹¹⁶ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 73. An example of this can be found in Northern Qi (552-77 CE) tombs that housed murals of the deceased surrounded by painted canopies and screens. The physical screens that had frequented tombs during the Han dynasty almost entirely disappeared by this period.

screen within the tomb and relying instead on the illusion of the screen produced by the painted mural.

A tale that further underscores the power of a painted subject on a screen through a portrayal that suggests reality through illusion, derives from an anecdote about Yan Yanzhi (284-456 CE), a page to the heir apparent of the four Liu Song emperors during the Southern dynasties, which preceded the Sui and Tang.¹¹⁷ Yan Yanzhi was in possession of a screen depicting painted women. The screen was considered a personal item, and an object of constant gazing and meditation for its owner.¹¹⁸ After his favorite concubine's death, Yan was troubled. As he was lying in bed, surrounded by his screen, a woman emerged from it and approached Yan Yanzhi, causing the screen to collapse on his body. Haunted by this event, Yan Yanzhi fell ill and died soon after.¹¹⁹ According to Wu's interpretation of the legend, both the illusionary depiction of the woman and the literal absence of the male gaze as Yan was asleep, which would restrict her to her space, enabled the woman to escape the confines of the screen, placed upon her by a male-dominated tradition.¹²⁰ She utilizes this construct of the screen frame to exact her vengeance about the man who had entrapped her in it, asserting an authoritative demeanor, enabled by both the screen and her illusion of a realistic portrayal. This tale reveals the popularity of legends that center around the screen as a medium that enables agency within the painted object and the firm belief of the ancient Chinese in the magic power of the painted screen.¹²¹ The screen, a fixture that establishes both a space and a

¹¹⁷ John Minford, *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), 543.

¹¹⁸ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 168.

¹¹⁹ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 121.

¹²⁰ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 104.

¹²¹ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 104.

place, serves as a divider between the exterior and the interior quarters. The interior quarters, as seen by this tale, are dominated by female agency, revealing the possibility that the woman is the master of the intimate, feminine space, as can also be seen in *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*, and the palace maid murals in the inner chambers of Yongtai's tomb.

This belief that the naturalistic style of a painting enables the transformation of an illusion into a reality can also be found in legendary tales originating from the Tang dynasty. As the Tang citizenry were deeply infatuated with the tricks of magic and illusion, it was perhaps not too difficult to understand their willingness to believe in the transformation of images on a screen into reality. A Tang dynasty tale tells of a scholar named Zhao Yan, who was enamored of a beautifully depicted woman on a screen. He vowed to marry her if she would come alive. The painter of the screen told Zhao Yan that the Lady Zhenzhen, the woman portrayed in the screen, would come alive if Zhao Yan called out to her for a hundred days. He did so, and she came alive, leaving the screen and becoming his wife. She bore him a son and their happy marriage lasted for a year, until one of Zhao Yan's friends warned him of the possibility of Lady Zhenzhen's true form was a demon. Zhao Yan's friend gave him a dagger to kill her. After seeing the dagger in Zhao Yan's possession, Lady Zhenzhen is disheartened at his distrust and decides to return to her original abode—the screen. However, when Zhao Yan gazes at the screen again, Lady Zhenzhen is not depicted alone. Instead, she is joined by her son.¹²² This reveals to the listener of the tale that Zhao Yan did not imagine his courtship and marriage with Lady Zhenzhen. The tale again underscores the same underlying

¹²² Wu, *The Double Screen*, 104.

message as the anecdote about Sun Quan and the fly. The artist's naturalistic rendering of the subject, along with the Tang viewer's willingness to believe in the power of the illusion, enabled the assertive transformation of the painted image into one of intellectual and authoritative capabilities. This trend that exists in the mortal realm can also be argued to occur in the immortal realm. Princess Yongtai's tomb, a place adorned for an immortal paradise and regarded as a path to the underworld also mirrored the societal conventions and characteristics of the mortal realm, making it likely that the realistic figures and their placement on the mural screens, similarly enabled the agency of the palace maids to come alive within the tomb.

Conclusion

Although Yongtai's tomb murals have been widely analyzed and discussed after their discovery in 1960, the focus of many scholars has been on the construction of the tomb, the significance of the pictorial program placements and the formal visual analysis of the mural paintings. My interpretation of the Yongtai palace maid murals as screens seeks to revisit these murals and provide an alternative understanding of them as more than stylistic masterpieces. I explore the possibility that these murals are screens, like those found in the earthly homes of the Tang elite, and as such, they are indicators of a feminine space within the Tang dynasty tomb. If viewed as screens, these murals that portray the advanced and naturalistic style of the palace maids introduces the idea of female agency represented by the palace maid's gaze outward from within the established feminine space.

Through the discussion of the Tang dynasty's history and their place as barbarians within Han dominated Chinese society, we can understand why they looked to the Han dynasty for validation through the construction of their tombs. By understanding the intricately intertwined relationship between these two dynasties, we can accurately interpret the spiritual pictorial motifs within the Tang tomb, like that of the spatiality location of the auspicious cranes adorning Yongtai's tomb ceiling. However, the Tang refused to be entirely subjugated by Confucian Han traditions. They adopted their own style in portraying realistic figures within the tomb that documented and celebrated their artistic achievement. This style reached beyond the mere representations of women as virtuous historical figures as displayed in *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, and instead

portrayed them as aesthetically and visually appealing subjects. Through understanding Tang gender politics and the political tension of Wu Zetian's rule that governed Yongtai's life and death, the notion of female agency becomes a probable genre within the Tang tombs—structures that were meant to reflect the societal traditions of the deceased. This idea of the female agency is manifested by the outward gaze of the palace maid, a motif found in other Tang paintings and copies of them in the imperial Chinese era. As seen in contemporaneous Tang paintings, the outward gaze is an uncommon subject, but one that demonstrates power and agency on behalf of the woman who asserts command over the viewer's penetrating gaze. Through understanding the significance of the gaze in mortal, domestic settings like those portrayed in the scroll paintings *Court Ladies Playing Double-Sixes* and *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*, we are able to discern the power and agency of the palace maid's gaze in Yongtai's tomb.

The superstition of magic and illusion engrained in Chinese culture that became highly popular in the Tang dynasty reveals the reasoning behind the widespread belief in living spirits inhabiting the subjects of the murals, allowing them to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. The proliferation of Chinese tales, like that of Sun Quan and Yan Yanzhi, and traditions of realistic paintings coming alive within their screen frame, further supports the likelihood that Tang citizens believed the naturalistic style in which the palace maids were painted and the screen which we understand them to inhabit, permitted the palace maids a commanding agency within their feminine space, as seen in the contemporaneous example of the *Night Revels of Han Xizai*. The distinct sectioning of the feminine space seen in *Night Revels* reveals the tradition of delineating the domestic space as one of inner and outer quarters, with the women asserting control and

even ease within their designated space but losing that power and command when outside of their space. As *Night Revels* reveals the traditional Tang elite's home, it is also likely that Yongtai's palace maids, within their own established space, were endowed with a sense of agency by their mortal counterparts, allowing them the ability to assert their authority and come alive within the inner feminine quarters of Yongtai's tomb.

Further Study

My interpretation of Yongtai's palace maid murals as screens and the feminine space they establish is not a conclusive one. Although it opens the door to the possibility of revisiting other imperial female's tombs and looking for the same form of frames and spaces that indicates a feminine place, the idea of women having agency within their place of death is still a subject that needs further study. In this paper, the idea of female agency explored in Yongtai's tomb and the contemporaneous scroll paintings of the time, establishes a motif of the outward gaze that while uncommon, flourished in the Tang dynasty, presumably due to the unrestricted behaviors and beliefs of the barbaric Tang rulers. Jowen R. Tung explores these notions of female agency and gender politics even further in his study on the gender politics of the Tang discourse. He dedicates a portion of his study to the nameless females present in the homes of the Tang elite—like those of maids, concubines and courtesans. According to Tang legal sanctions, these lowly women were bought and sold at will and afforded no protection by the law. Even in death, they were exiled from history; their names missing from tombstone inscriptions—consistent with their denigrated status in the mortal realm.¹²³ Yet, these lowly women are

¹²³ Jowen R. Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs: Gender Politics in Tang Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 95-96.

portrayed as carefree, vibrant beings within Yongtai's inner chambers. They have a sense of agency and livelihood that seems inconsistent with the Tang societal views of them. This begs the question as to what the artist's intention in was depicting the palace maids as representations of vivacious palace maids who seem imbued with an aura of sophistication and class, thus departing from the artistic fidelity to the realism of the era.

Perhaps this is one of the paradoxes present in the Tang—a dynasty that sought to embrace Han traditions of burial that was rooted deeply in Confucianism, yet also desired to elevate a foreign religion, Buddhism, in every aspect of society in order to validate their rule. Tung also addresses this topic in his study, titled “The Tang Paradoxes”. Tang women were famed for their liberated behaviors, yet poetry and literati of the time confined them to traditions of the Confucian past.¹²⁴ These maids within Yongtai's tomb are of lowly status, yet they seemed to be elevated, even honored within the feminine space. They are given an agency that paradoxically was not afforded to them within the mortal realm. These maids were also seen as a way to dismantle the Confucian ideals of the proper woman—the maids and courtesans of the home were seen as women who would incite jealousy and turmoil within the feminine space, which would trigger the female master of the space to act in a manner unbefitting of a traditional Confucian wife.¹²⁵ Why is there such a mixture of acceptability and reproach of the type of women within Yongtai's inner chamber? Did the artist abandon the societal views of the Tang times in order to aesthetically portray these women as lively figures congruent with the artistic styles of the time? If so, why do some Confucian tomb motifs still appear within

¹²⁴ Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs*, 10.

¹²⁵ Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs*, 96.

Yongtai's tomb, while the very nature of the palace maids in the mortal realm were considered lacking in female Confucian virtue?

Additionally, Yongtai's tomb warrants further study when we take a step back and look at the tomb as existing not only within its singular contextual relationship to the Han dynasty, but also how its realm of influence extended beyond the Tang's collapse in 907 AD. From the depiction of women in Yongtai's tomb and the liberated female era of the Tang, it is perhaps difficult to understand how Chinese society seemed to revert from the freedom given to women back to some of the more restrictive imperial eras. The end of the Tang dynasty marked the end of an era that gave women a sense of agency within the patrilineal society. Indeed, after the Tang collapsed and the Song dynasty was established in 960CE, women were even more restricted and confined to patriarchal tradition. The Song dynasty saw the renewed fervor of binding women's feet and the revival of Confucianism that came with the Han people recapturing the empire and establishing the Song.¹²⁶ Additionally, the Song scholar-artists rejected the form of naturalism that was perfected during the Tang, curbing the stylistic agency afforded to the figural woman.¹²⁷ This opens the discussion of whether the rule of Wu Zetian and the gender equalities afforded to Tang women played a part in the strong oppression of women in the following dynasty. Perhaps the Han founders of the Song believed the age-old tradition that women were responsible for the fall of dynasties, especially women upon a screen. This belief was referenced as the 'dangerous' screen—a screen like that from the legend of Yan Yanzhi was often linked to disorder and death at the hands of

¹²⁶ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 6.

¹²⁷ Powers and Tsiang, *A Companion to Chinese Art*, 132.

female dominance over political affairs.¹²⁸ Could it be possible that the Song sought to destroy any of these inauspicious omens that would cause the downfall of the dynasty? Could this sort of prejudice against women's screens—objects that show the dominance and agency of women, be a factor in the Song's renewed embrace of Neo-Confucianism and its tradition of oppressing women, to ensure the male's rightful dominant place in society? These questions, while beyond the scope of my paper, are ones that I am interested in pursuing in future research and it is my hope that this research into the feminine tomb space begins a wider discussion within the Chinese art historical community about the agency and dominance of women in the Tang dynasty.

¹²⁸ Wu, *The Double Screen*, 121-122. A screen commissioned by the Emperor Wen in the Sui dynasty was painted with dancing girls who appeared lifelike within their frames. Soon after it was created, the Sui dynasty perished. The screen was taken by the rulers of the Tang dynasty and during its decline, the screen belonged to Yang Guifei, who was believed by many historians to have caused the An Lushan Rebellion and the downfall of the Tang.

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Figures

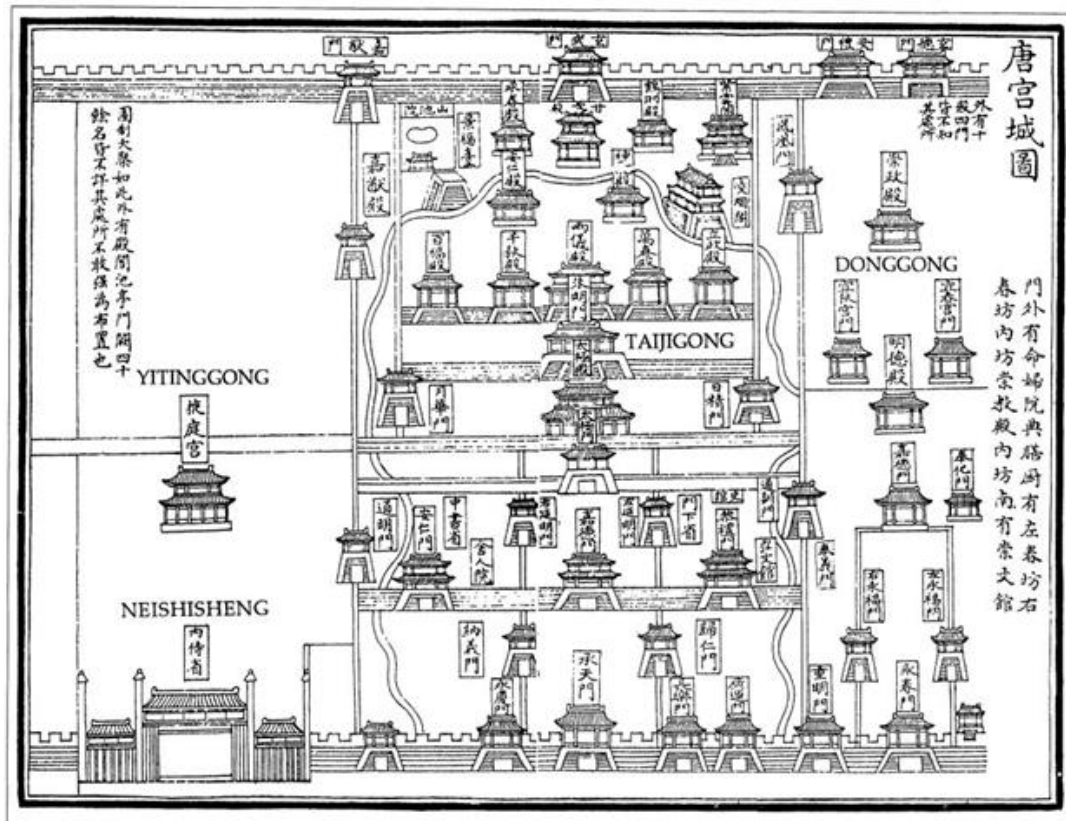


Figure 1.1 Map of the Palace-City, 1998. *Artibus Asiae* 58.



Figure 1.2 Qianling Youlan Tu, 2015. Qian Xian, Shaanxi Province.

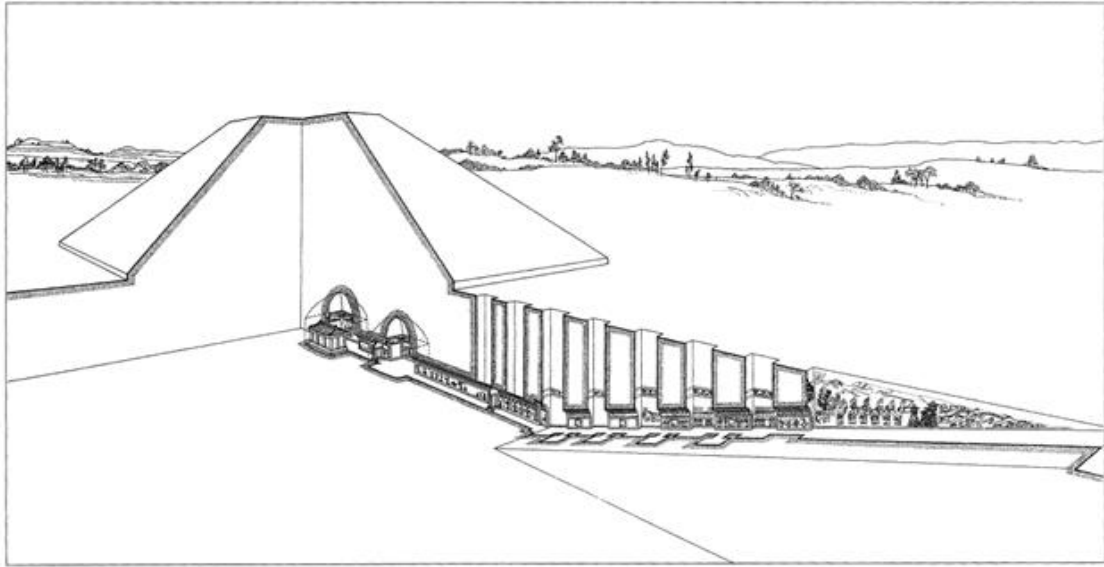


Figure 1.3 Drawing of cross-section of the tomb of Crown Prince Yide, 1998. *Artibus Asiae* 58.

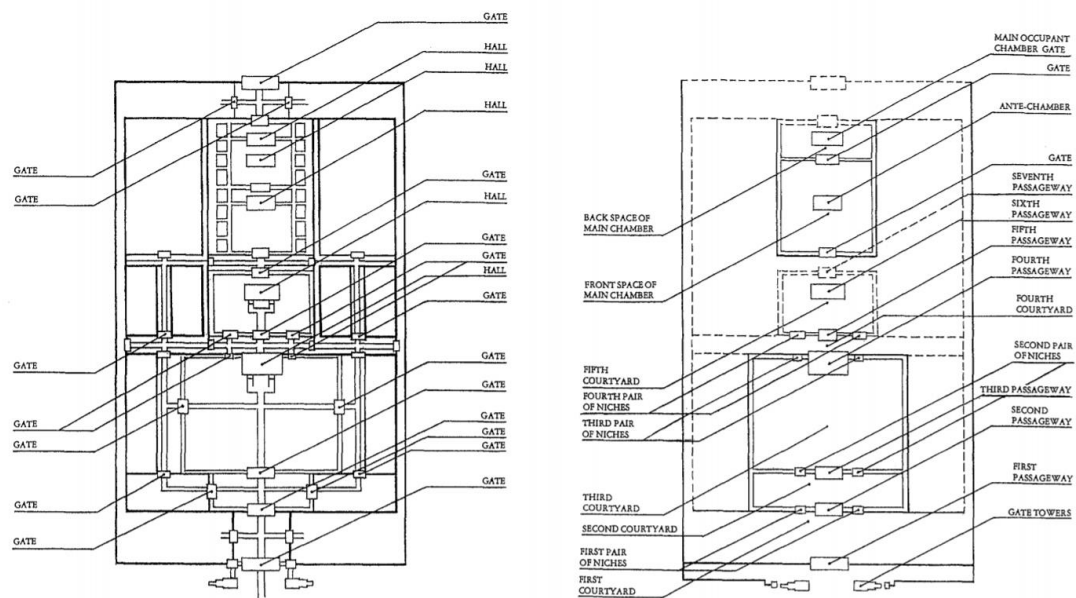


Figure 1.4 Reconstructed Plan of the Eastern Palace and the Plan of Crown Prince Yide's Tomb, 1998. *Artibus Asiae* 58.

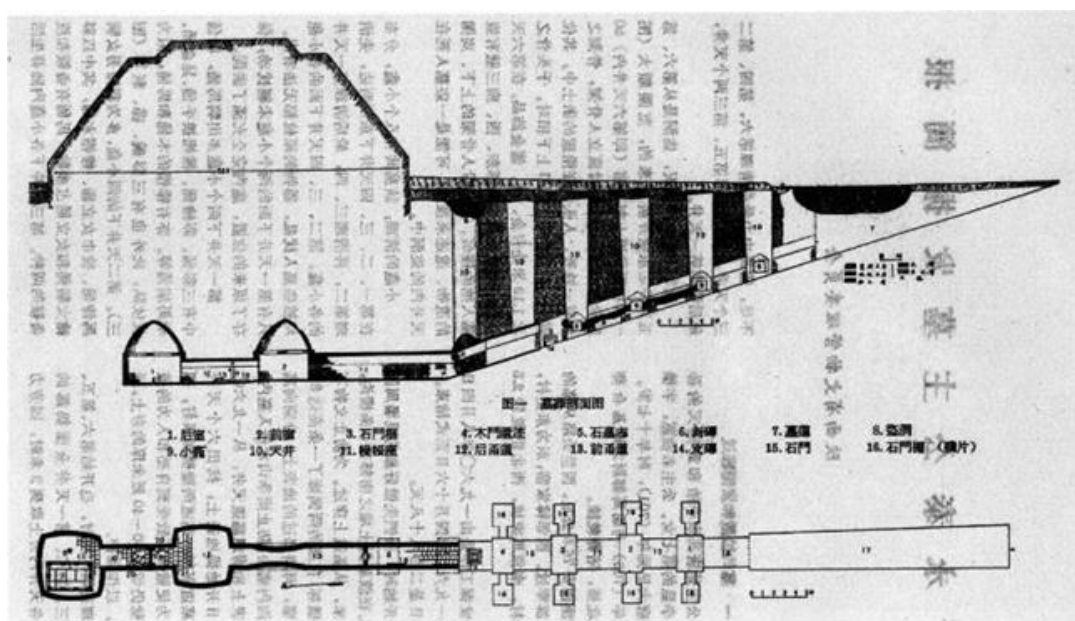


Figure 1.5 Plan and section of Princess Yongtai's tomb, 1964. "A Study on the Style and Maid's Image of Princess Yongtai's Wall Painting."



Figure 1.6 Armed male guards and watchtowers. Detail of painting on east wall tomb path of Yongtai's tomb, 706 CE. Qianling Mausoleum, Qian Xian, Shaanxi Province.

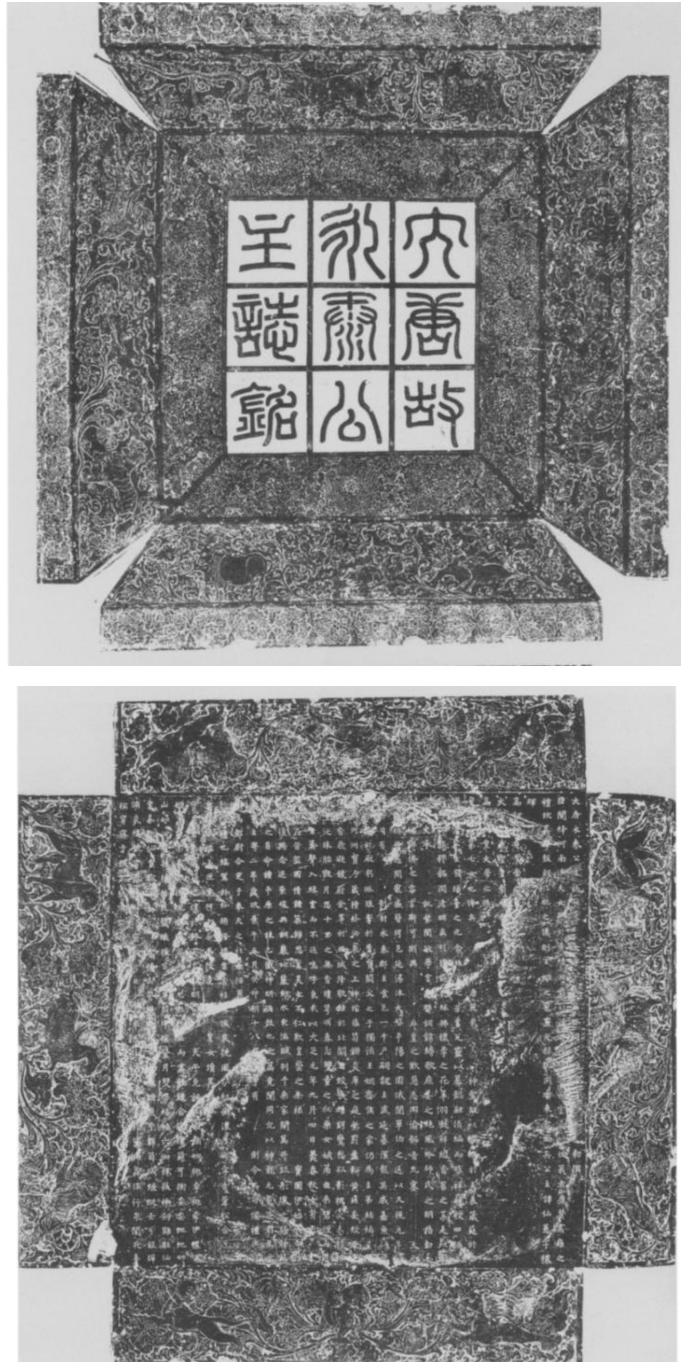


Figure 1.7 Princess Yongtai's tomb stone epitaph cover (top) and base (bottom). "A Study on the Style and Maid's Image of Princess Yongtai's Wall Painting."



Figure 1.8 Palace Maids, early 8th century, mural on south side of the east wall front chamber in Tang Princess Yongtai's tomb, ink and color on a plastered wall. Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province.



Figure 1.9 Palace Maids (detail of shoes), early 8th century, detail of a mural on south side of the east wall front chamber in Tang Princess Yongtai's tomb, ink and color on a plastered wall. Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province.



Figure 1.10 Palace Maids (detail of clothing), early 8th century, detail of a mural on south side of the east wall front chamber in Tang Princess Yongtai's tomb, ink and color on a plastered wall. Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province.



Figure 1.11 Palace Maid (detail of gaze), early 8th century, detail of a mural on south side of the east wall front chamber in Tang Princess Yongtai's tomb, ink and color on a plastered wall. Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province.



Figure 1.12 Palace Maids (detail of downward gaze), early 8th century, detail of a mural on south side of the east wall front chamber in Tang Princess Yongtai's tomb, ink and color on a plastered wall. Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province.



Figure 1.13 Zhou Fang, *Court Ladies Playing Double Sixes*, 8th century, ink and color on silk. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Figure 1.14 Attributed to Emperor Huizong, *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*, 12th century copy of Tang dynasty work by Zhang Xuan, ink, color and gold on silk. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 1.15 Attributed to Emperor Huizong, original by Zhang Xuan, *Court Ladies Playing Double Sixes* (detail of outward gaze), 12th century copy of Tang dynasty work, ink, color and gold on silk. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 1.16 Attributed to Emperor Huizong, original by Zhang Xuan, *Court Ladies Playing Double Sixes* (detail of side cast gaze), 12th century copy of Tang dynasty work, ink, color and gold on silk. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 1.17 Palace Maids on the south side of the east wall, early 8th century, mural on north side of the east wall front chamber in Tang Princess Yongtai's tomb, ink and color on a plastered wall. Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province.



Figure 1.18 Reconstruction of Palace Maids, early 8th century, murals on north and south side of the east wall front chamber in Tang Princess Yongtai's tomb, ink and color on a plastered wall. Qianling Mausoleum, Qianxian, Shaanxi province.

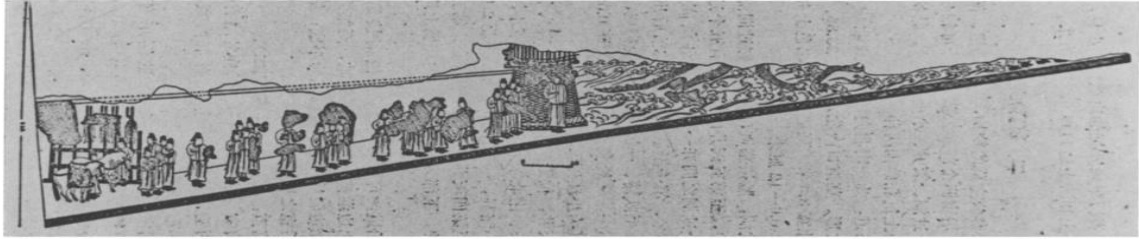


Figure 1.19 Reconstruction of Princess Yongtai's east wall tomb mural path, 1973. "A Study on the Style and Maid's Image of Princess Yongtai's Wall Painting."

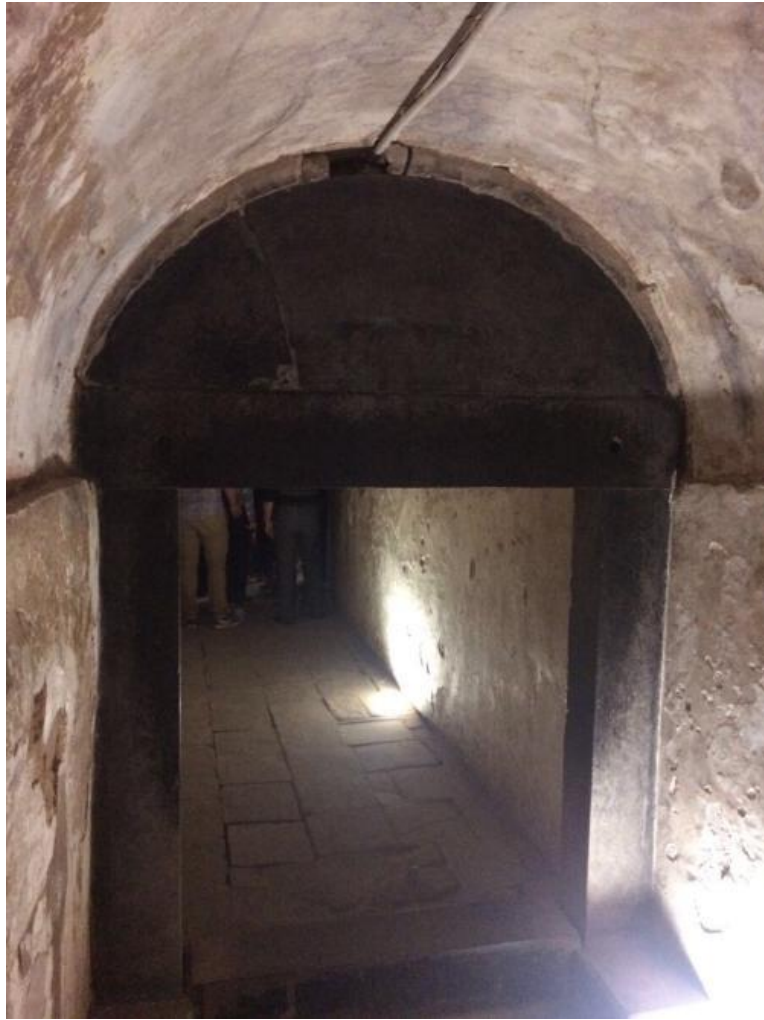


Figure 2.1 Door sealing the inner chamber of Tang Princess Yongtai's tomb, early 8th century, stone. Qianling Mausoleum, Qianxian, Shaanxi province.



Figure 2.2 *Screen of Ladies Under Trees*, late 8th century, mural in a Tang tomb at Wangcui, ink and color on a plastered wall. Shaanxi Provincial Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province.

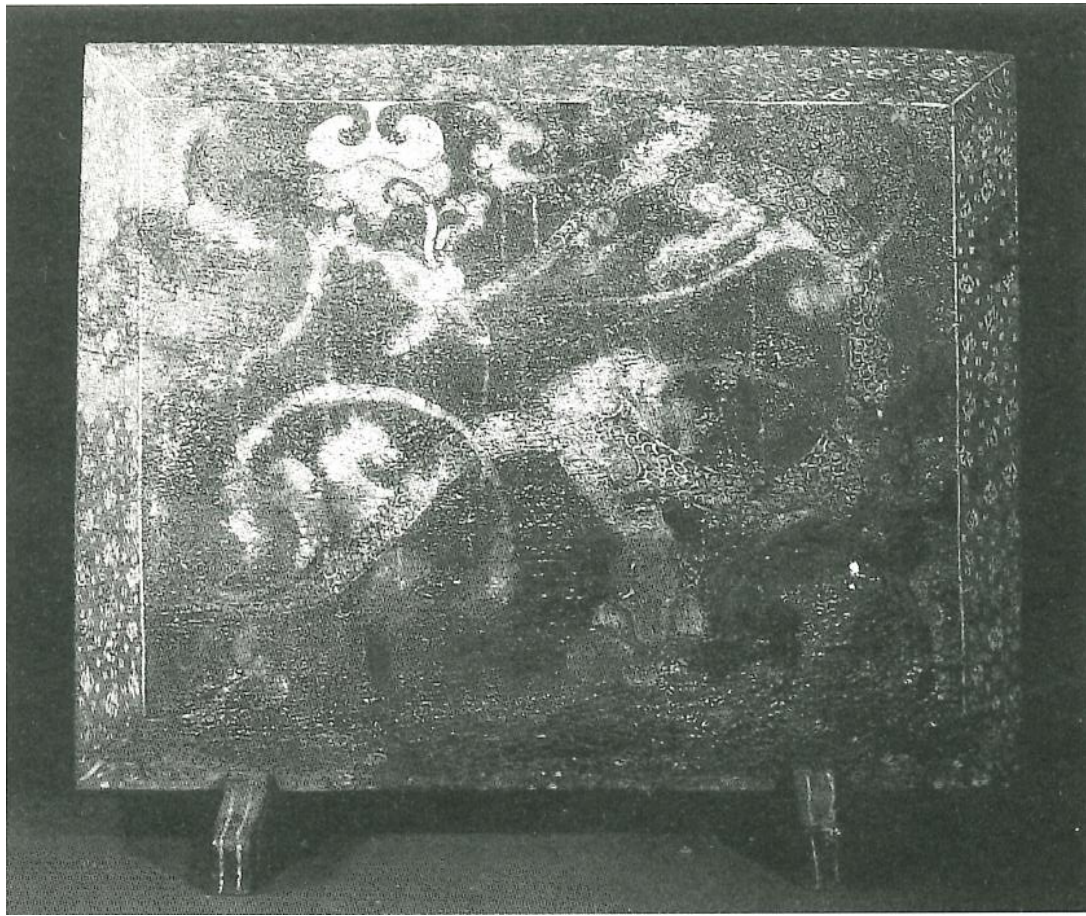


Figure 2.3 Screen from Mawangdui Tomb no. 1, 2nd century BC, lacquer on wood. Hunan Provincial Museum, Changsha, Hunan province.



Figure 2.4 Painted Screen from Sima Jinlong's tomb, before 484 CE, lacquer on wood. Shaanxi Provincial Museum, Taiyuan, Shaanxi province.

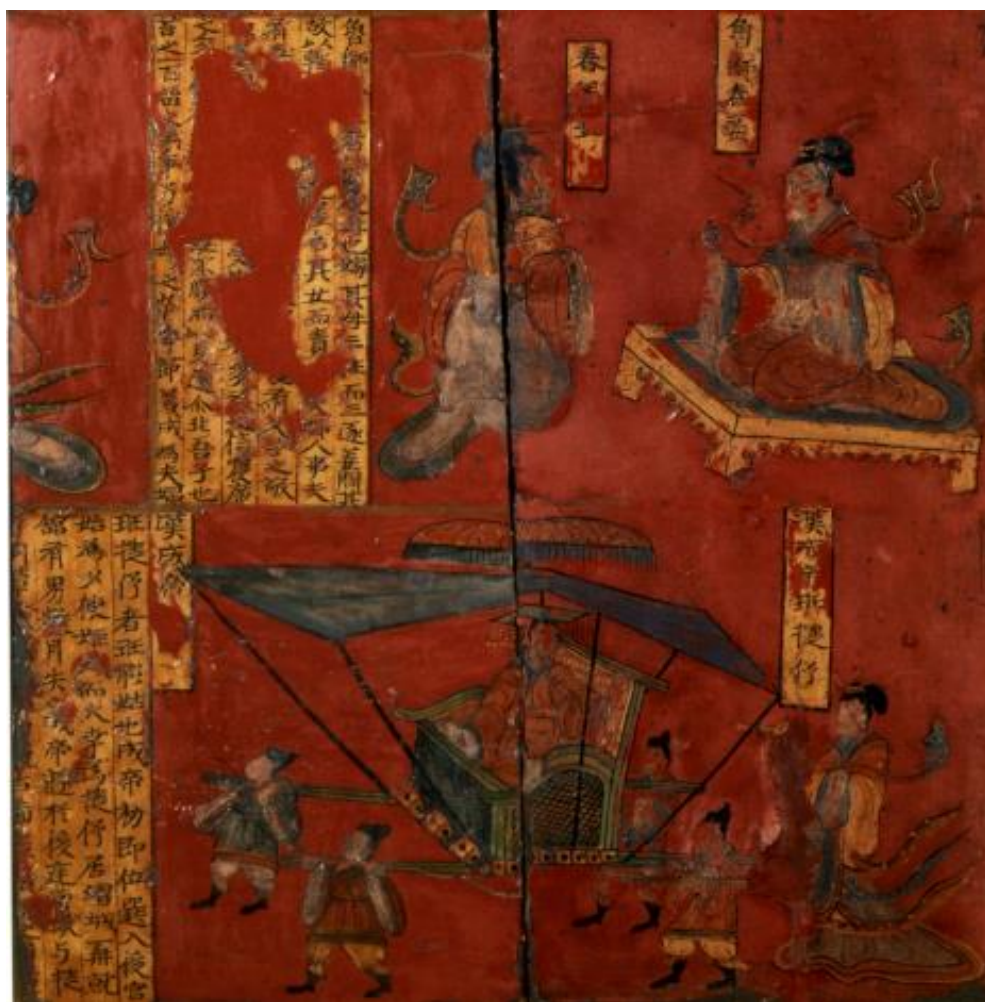


Figure 2.5 Painted Screen from Sima Jinlong's tomb (detail), before 484 CE, lacquer on wood. Shaanxi Provincial Museum, Taiyuan, Shaanxi province.



Figure 2.6 Gu Kaizhi, *Wise and Benevolent Women*, 13th century copy of 4th century work, handscroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 2.7 Zhou Fang, *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, late 8th to early 9th century, handscroll, ink and color on silk. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Hunan, Shenyang province.



Figure 2.8 Zhou Fang, *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* (detail), late 8th - early 9th century, handscroll, ink and color on silk. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Hunan, Shenyang province.



Figure 2.9 Gu Hongzhong, *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*, 12th century copy of a 10th century work, handscroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 2.10 Gu Hongzhong, *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* (detail of pipa), 12th century copy of a 10th century work, handscroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 2.11 Gu Hongzhong, *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* (detail of second section), 12th century copy of a 10th century work, handscroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.

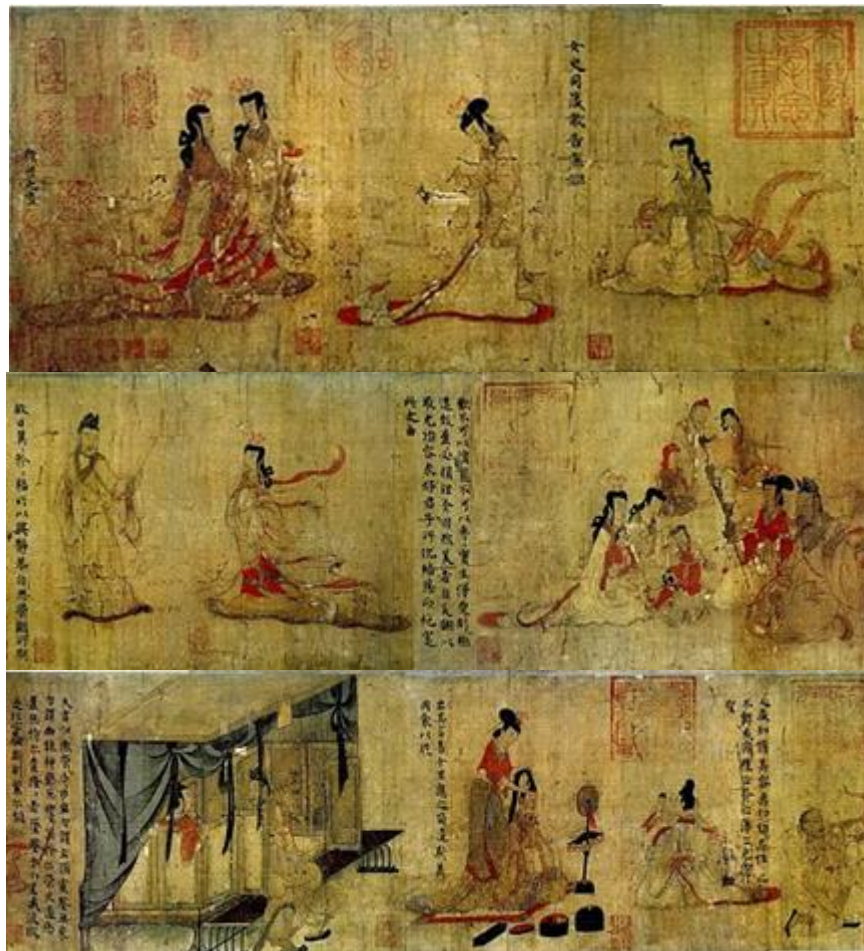


Figure 2.12 Gu Kaizhi, *Admonitions of the Court Instructress*, 5th to 8th century, handscroll, ink and color on silk. British Museum, London.



Figure 2.13 Gu Kaizhi, *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* (detail), 5th to 8th century, handscroll, ink and color on silk. British Museum, London.